

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

178

The  
Neoconservatives:  
An Endangered Species

*By Russell Kirk*



The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973 as a non-partisan, tax-exempt policy research institute dedicated to the principles of free competitive enterprise, limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense. The Foundation's research and study programs are designed to make the voices of responsible conservatism heard in Washington, D.C., throughout the United States, and in the capitals of the world.

Heritage publishes its research in a variety of formats for the benefit of policy makers; the communications media; the academic, business, and financial communities; and the public at large. Over the past five years alone The Heritage Foundation has published some 1,500 books, monographs, and studies, ranging in size from the 927-page government blueprint, *Mandate for Leadership III: Policy Strategies for the 1990s*, to the more frequent "Critical Issues" monographs and the topical "Backgrounders," "Issue Bulletins," and "Talking Points" papers. Heritage's other regular publications include the *Business/Education Insider*, *Mexico Watch*, and *Policy Review*, a quarterly journal of analysis and opinion.

In addition to the printed word, Heritage regularly brings together national and international opinion leaders and policy makers to discuss issues and ideas in a continuing series of seminars, lectures, debates, briefings, and conferences.

Heritage is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and is recognized as a publicly supported organization described in Section 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(vi) of the Code. Individuals, corporations, companies, associations, and foundations are eligible to support the work of The Heritage Foundation through tax-deductible gifts.

*Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.*

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999  
U.S.A.  
202/546-4400

# THE NEOCONSERVATIVES: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

by Russell Kirk

There stands before you, ladies and gentlemen, one of the few survivors of the original intrepid band of Neoconservatives. Very early in the 1950s, some of us who declared our belief in the Permanent Things were so denominated by our adversaries; but we did not clasp the epithet to our bosoms as a badge of honor — unlike the people who, a quarter of a century later, pleaded guilty as charged, and gloried in their shame.

To put the matter another way, the terms “New Conservative” and “Neoconservative” began to appear in certain journals nearly forty years ago. They were applied to such writers as Robert Nisbet, Peter Viereck, Daniel Boorstin, Clinton Rossiter, and your servant. When commentators and critics of that remote epoch entertained sentiments kindly in some degree toward such literate obscurants, they used the term “New Conservative” — implying that misguided though such relatively youthful reactionaries might be, still they probably meant well, and occasionally displayed glimmerings of sense; nay, that now and again such New Conservatives even made suggestions worth discussing, though perhaps *per accidens*.

Such were the opinions of our friendlier critics. But journalists and professors who thought less well of us pinned upon us the dread label “Neoconservatives,” knowing us for symptoms of the recrudescence of a loathsome plague called reaction, enemies of all progress, oppressors of the poor, either tools of the bloated capitalist or else toadies of feudal barons, simpletons enamored of the superstitions of the childhood of the race. The worst fears of these evangelists of secular progress came to be realized; they were true prophets. For indeed revived conservative doctrines were disseminated throughout the land by our malicious typewriters, and the American people were arrested in their march toward an earthly Zion.

**Fresh Horde of Dissenters.** Yet we scribbling conservatives at the beginning of the 1950s, or at least most of us, did not eagerly accept the appellation “New Conservative,” nor yet that of “Neoconservative.” Some of us merely styled ourselves conservatives, being well aware that conservatism is nothing new; others of our kidney preferred to bear no dog-tag.

Presently it came to pass, during the reign of King Lyndon the Dealer, that the media of opinion began to recognize the existence of a loose league of other persons whom we may call the New Neoconservatives, so to speak. This fresh horde of dissenters from Holy Liberalism were men and women of Manhattan, for the most part, and of Jewish stock

---

Russell Kirk is a Distinguished Scholar at The Heritage Foundation.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on October 6, 1988, delivering the last of four lectures on “Varieties of the Conservative Impulse.” The first lecture, on the Cultural Conservatives, was published as *Heritage Lecture* No. 151; the second, on Libertarians, as *Heritage Lecture* No. 157; and the third, on Popular Conservatives, as *Heritage Lecture* No. 168.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1988 by The Heritage Foundation.

chiefly — although they recruited some Protestant and Catholic auxiliaries. At one time or another, nearly all of them had professed to be radicals or ritualistic liberals — that a long time ago, in the case of some of their leaders. These are the Neoconservatives so much praised or drubbed nowadays. Mr. Irving Kristol and his associates accepted without much protest the Neoconservative tag pinned upon them by their adversaries — much as Whigs and Tories, during the seventeenth century, had come to wear as badges of honor the derisive epithets thrust upon them by enemies.

**Vials of Scorn.** Although I paid no very close attention to the emerging of these late recruits to the conservative movement, I did welcome their appearance, perceiving that not a few among them were people of talent and energy, active in serious journalism and in certain universities, and giving promise of the rise of conservative or quasi-conservative opinions among the Jewish intelligentsia of New York in particular — a class previously given over to radicalism or a disintegrated liberalism. Perhaps I expected too much of these Manhattan allies.

When the late Michael Harrington smote them hip and thigh, I was not taken aback: such an assault was to be expected from a Syndicalist. When Mr. Peter Steinfels, editor of *Commonweal* then, poured the vials of his scorn upon their devoted heads in a book entitled *The Neoconservatives*, I was puzzled that Mr. Joseph Sobran, in the pages of *National Review*, found some substance in Steinfels' acerbic criticisms; I encouraged Dr. Frank Annuziata to write for my quarterly *University Bookman* a defense of these Neoconservatives against Steinfels.

**Insufficiently Capitalistic.** Although one may trace the beginnings of Neoconservatism of the Manhattan sort back to the year 1965, the ladies and gentlemen of that political sect did not loom large for me until the early years of the Reagan Administration. I was mildly startled when, in 1980, Mr. George Gilder, addressing The Heritage Foundation, declared emphatically that he was no Neoconservative. (He found them insufficiently capitalistic, and morally inferior to Mrs. Phyllis Schlafly.) In short, I was prejudiced in favor of these Prodigal Sons, come home to a conservative patrimony, who have been denominated the Neoconservatives. How earnestly they founded magazine upon magazine! How skillfully they insinuated themselves into the councils of the Nixon and Reagan Administrations! How very audaciously some of them, a decade ago, proclaimed their ability to alter the whole tone of *The New York Times*. (That was a consummation devoutly to be wished, but it turned out to be a mere delusory hope of the Neoconservatives; the *Times* remains unregenerate.) Yet their *hubris* in that instance notwithstanding, the Neoconservatives certainly displayed enterprising talents in their early years.

For some persons who are called, or who call themselves, Neoconservatives, my approbation is undiminished. Who would not welcome to an alliance such champions of truth as Pastor [Richard John] Neuhaus, such prudent sociologists as the Doctors [Peter and Brigitte] Berger, such redoubtable educators as Diane Ravitch, such sound scholars as Nathan Glazer? Often such opponents of nihilism and fanatic ideology contend in the Academy against bitter enemies who outnumber the Neoconservative professors many times over. Let us sustain them.

Yet in general the Neoconservative group have not made many friends nor influenced many people, despite talents for self-publicizing. As Mr. Ben Hart, tongue somewhat in cheek, observed to me about the Neoconservatives while we were arranging this lecture, "There are only about three of them." They have no true political constituency, not even in Manhattan — or perhaps especially not in Manhattan. They have shown no great literary skill: I fear that not one book by a Neoconservative will still be read in the year 2000. Neoconservatives have tended regrettably to become a little sect, distrusted and reproached by what we may call mainline conservatives, who now and again declare that many of the Neoconservatives are seeking chiefly place and preferment. Incidentally, doubtless many of you present today, ladies and gentlemen, have observed that the addresses of certain eminent Neoconservatives have been rejected by the people round Vice-President Bush; and it appears to me that, for good or ill, President Bush will not be eager to obtain the services of this little Sacred Band — which had made itself exclusive, and now finds itself excluded.

**Selfish and Uninstructed.** I offer you two specimens of the rejection of the Neoconservatives that I encounter nowadays in many quarters. My first extract is from a letter recently received from a very distinguished historian in Pennsylvania. "I have burned my bridges with most (not all) of the Konservatives, and especially with the neo-conservatives, who are selfish and uninstructed radicals and progressives, wishing to pour cement all over the country and make the world safe for democracy, well beyond the dreams of Wilson," he writes to me. "A feeling for the land, for its conservation, and for the strong modesty of a traditional patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) none of them has."

My second instance of the spreading distaste for Neoconservatives comes from a well-known literary scholar. "I would not be at all surprised to see the Neo-Cons jump ship if Dukakis is elected; they would be perfectly capable of making an accommodation with the socialist wing of the Democratic Party," he tells me. ". . . It is significant that when the Neo-Cons wish to damn any conservative who has appealed for a grant to a conservative foundation, they tell the officers of the foundation that the conservative is a fascist. . . . I believe that the chief enemy of American conservatism has not been the Marxists, nor even the socialist liberals in the Democratic Party, but the Neo-Conservatives, who have sabotaged the movement from within and exploited it for their own selfish purposes."

**Simple Old Label.** Now the strictures of the gentlemen I have quoted cannot well apply to some of the better known people called Neoconservatives; for there are among that group high-minded men and women of principle. Our difficulty here is very like that I encountered when I lectured, a few months ago, on the Libertarians: the appellation Neoconservative, like the appellation Libertarian, is so widely employed, and so variously, as to seem to include people of radically opposed views. What is a Neoconservative, really? Is he, as Harrington and Steinfels saw him, a liberal who opportunistically has turned his coat? Is he primarily a seeker after power and the main chance? Or is he a man who has new ideas about the defense of the Permanent Things? For my part, I wish that certain so-called Neoconservatives whose views and lives I approve, like certain Libertarians for whom I have a fellow feeling, would content themselves, as do I, with the simple old label Conservative.

Be that as it may, I predict that within a very few years we will hear no more of the Neoconservatives: some will have fallen away, and others will have been merged with the main current of America's conservative movement, and yet others' pert loquacity will have been silenced by the tomb. After all, the leading Neoconservatives are not new people; they have become old people already, as I have myself. There was published in a recent number of *Commentary* a charmingly naive essay in which it was argued that the children and grandchildren of extant Neoconservatives would come to form a Sacred Band, calling themselves Neoconservatives life long, and ruling the American roost. This dream ignores the fact that things initially new do not long remain new: everything ages; yesteryear's novelty ceases to charm.

**Ignoring Experience.** Self-proclaimed political elites do not long endure in this democratic republic; but the Neoconservatives prefer to ignore Experience — a hard master, Benjamin Franklin says. Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it, as Santayana reminds us. Deficient in historical understanding as in familiarity with humane letters, most of the Neoconservatives lack those long views and that apprehension of the human condition which forms a basis for successful statecraft. Often clever, these Neoconservatives; seldom wise.



Having dreed the weird of the faction called the Neoconservatives, I proceed to praise them. For despite the seeming harshness of the judgments I uttered a few minutes ago, I have many sympathies with the Neoconservatives, and admiration for some of them. Permit me, then, to touch upon their achievements.

**The Art of the Possible.** First, in a time when riotous students and urban mobs did very much as they pleased; in an era when the Academy and the learned societies were dominated by radical doctrinaires; when the blunders domestic and foreign of the Johnson Administration enfeebled the nation — why, at that juncture the Neoconservatives came forward, proclaiming that politics is the art of the possible, and did their best in the cause of sound sense. They drubbed sentimental liberalism and scorned radical fanaticism. In that hour they maintained stoutly the rule of law and the politics of prudence.

Second, we are in debt to the Neoconservatives for their founding of several intelligent serious journals — somewhat narrow in their scope and their readership and in their circle of contributors, perhaps, but containing many valuable articles on public policy, education, and other major subjects of the day. These publications have helped to demonstrate that, after all, conservatives are not so stupid as John Stuart Mill fancied them to be.

Third, in the realm of domestic politics at least, the Neoconservatives began discussion of practical alternatives to mere social drifting; they, or some of them, knowing that the national clock could not be turned back to the year 1928, endeavored to frame public policies that would meet realistically the necessities of the concluding three decades of the 20th century.

Fourth, in foreign policy the Neoconservatives have opposed manfully — or, in the case of Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, womanfully — the designs and menaces of the Soviet

Union. They have been well aware that America is not merely opposing a national rival, but (graver peril) combatting an armed doctrine — as Burke said of British resistance to the Jacobins two centuries ago. Sometimes, true, they have been rash in their schemes of action, pursuing a fanciful democratic globalism rather than the national interest of the United States; on such occasions I have tended to side with those moderate Libertarians who set their faces against foreign entanglements. And not seldom it has seemed as if some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States — a position they will have difficulty in maintaining, as matters drift in the Levant. Yet by and large, I think, they have helped to redeem America's foreign policy from the confusion into which it fell during and after the wars in southeastern Asia. In this they have redressed the balance in the conduct of foreign affairs. In a little while, nevertheless, I shall utter some misgivings about possible long-run consequences of their understanding of America's international undertakings.

**A Matter of Judicious Speculation.** In short, the Neoconservatives have exercised considerable intellectual influence (though not conspicuously in the Academy), and have taken a vigorous hand in the decisions of the national government, during an era when the conservative movement in this country needed reinforcement. Whether they can achieve much of value in the future is a matter for judicious speculation — to which I now proceed.



A little while ago I remarked that the Neoconservatives are often clever, but seldom wise. T.S. Eliot's lines from *The Rock* may be applied to them:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In their publications, the Neoconservatives thrust upon us a great deal of useful information, and obviously are possessed of considerable knowledge of the world about us. But in the understanding of the human condition and in the apprehension of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization, they are painfully deficient.

**Infatuation with Ideology.** An instance of this lack of wisdom is the Neoconservatives' infatuation with ideology. Some of you ladies and gentlemen present here today may have heard some years ago my exchange, on this very platform, with Mr. Irving Kristol, concerning ideology. He and various of his colleagues wish to persuade us to adopt an ideology of our own to set against Marxist and other totalist ideologies. Ideology, I venture to remind you, is political fanaticism: at best it is the substitution of slogans for real political thought. Ideology animates, in George Orwell's phrase, "the streamlined men who think in slogans and talk in bullets."

Over the years, I have written a good deal about the curse of ideological infatuation; so I do not propose today to digress at any length on that grim subject. I refer you, rather, to the recently-published collection of Dr. Gerhart Niemeyer's essays entitled *Aftersight and Foresight*. In his essay "Ideas Have Also Roots," Professor Niemeyer reproves Mr. Kristol

for his unfortunate advocacy of a “Republican ideology,” and goes on to describe the unhappy infiltration of ideological illusions into American politics.

**Role of Humpty Dumpty.** “Ideology is not confined to communists and fascists,” Dr. Niemeyer writes. “We, too, have our share of it, and it shows in our policies. All modern ideologies have the same irrational root: the permeation of politics with millenarian ideas of pseudo-religious character. The result is a dreamworld. Woodrow Wilson dreamed both of ‘a world safe for democracy,’ and of ‘enduring peace,’ ‘world safe from war.’ More recently, our national leaders have talked about ‘creating’ a new society, a ‘Great Society,’ and to that end making ‘war against poverty,’ ‘war against hunger,’ ‘creating new men,’ ‘making the world new as at the beginning,’ building ‘a city shining on a hill.’ All these presume that man could create himself, implying that he is not a creature, dependent on God, but the master of his own soul and destiny. Civilizational activities are given the character of salvation and thus stamped with a label of sacredness.”

A very recent example of this puerile infatuation of the Neoconservatives with “a new ideology” or “an American ideology” is a very lengthy, highly pretentious article by Mr. Michael Novak in the fall 1988 number of that interesting magazine *This World*. Entrenching himself behind a formidable array of footnotes — most of them citations from his own writings — Mr. Novak advocates ideology as “an indispensable but secondary guide to social action.” Unlike many Neoconservatives, Mr. Novak does pay some respects to religion in this essay — conveniently ignoring the unpleasant fact that all ideologies are anti-religions, or inverted religions. But the reader may suspect, uncomfortably, that Mr. Novak’s sentiments are much like those of the late Robert S. Kerr, long senator from Oklahoma, who was given to intoning from time to time, “God always has His arm around my shoulder.” In his role of Humpty Dumpty, Novak presumes to redefine this word ideology: he instructs us that “Ideology is a guiding vision of future social action.” Words mean, of course, whatever Humpty Dumpty and Michael Novak wish them to mean.

**“This Vision Stuff.”** In the light of this definition, one heartily endorses the offhand remark of Vice-President George Bush that he does not relish “this vision stuff.” Visionary politics, as Dr. Niemeyer emphasizes in the paragraph I quoted a moment ago, do not open our way to an Earthly Paradise.

What is this ideology that Kristol and Novak would have us embrace? Why, the ideology of a term Mr. Novak has popularized, “Democratic Capitalism.”

By vigorous advocacy of Democratic Capitalism, by doctrinaire attachment to that ideology, Mr. Kristol and Mr. Novak are saying in effect, Marxism will be undone and the American people will be given a vision of social perfection. What a feeble reed they put into one’s hand.

Not caring to break a butterfly on the wheel, I offer you merely a very succinct refutation of the strange notion that the ideology called Democratic Capitalism can set our collective American steps aright. First of all, the phrase is a contradiction in terms; for capitalism is not democratic, nor should it be, nor can it be. The test of the market is not a matter of counting noses and soliciting votes; and the mark of capitalism is not the fallacy that “one man is as good as another, or maybe a little better,” but large decisions by shrewd



entrepreneurs and managers. Nor is there any egalitarianism in the distribution of the rewards of a market economy.

Second, “Capitalism” is a word popularized by Karl Marx; it implies that the selfish accumulation and enjoyment of capital is the sole purpose of our society, soon to be overthrown by the proletariat. “Capitalism” is represented as a complete system, moral, intellectual, political, and economic: an ideology that has been devised by the greedy capitalists to serve as a false front for this enslaving of the workers of the world. Such is the Marxist argument; and Messrs. Kristol and Novak appear to be fulfilling Marx’s prophecies by cobbling up just such an ideology.

**The “Terrible Simplifiers.”** Now in truth our society is not a “capitalist system” at all, but a complex cultural and social arrangement that comprehends religion, morals, prescriptive political institutions, literary culture, a competitive economy, private property, and much more besides. It is not a system designed to secure and advance the interests of great possessors of capital goods unjustly acquired. Do Kristol and Novak, in the role of [Jacob Christoph] Burckhardt’s “terrible simplifiers,” think they will gain the affections of the peoples of the world by actually declaring Americans (and their allies) to be the very capitalist exploiters the Marxists have been denouncing all these years? By promulgating an ideological manifesto that offers nothing better than a utopia of “democratic” creature-comforts?

As for the democratic aspect of this Neoconservative ideology, “the Constitution of the United States is not for export,” as Dr. Daniel Boorstin puts it. To expect that all the world should, and must, adopt the peculiar political institutions of the United States — which often do not work very well even at home — is to indulge the most unrealistic of visions; yet just that seems to be the hope and expectation of many Neoconservatives. Such naive doctrine led us into the wars in Indo-China — the notion that we could establish or prop up in Vietnam a “democracy” that never had existed anywhere in southeastern Asia. Such foreign policies are such stuff as dreams are made of; yet they lead to the heaps of corpses of men who died in vain. We need to ask ourselves whether the Neoconservative architects of international policy are very different from the foreign policy advisors who surrounded Lyndon Johnson.

**Insisting on Abstract Democracy.** Let me make myself a little clearer in this matter by repeating here what I wrote some months ago in my review of Dr. Jeane Kirkpatrick’s two volumes of speeches and papers. Mrs. Kirkpatrick declares that the United States should pursue a foreign policy of advancing “human rights,” rather than one of the national interest; and she tells us, in effect, that only democratic governments are legitimate governments. That is the Neoconservatives’ ideological dogma.

Yet Ambassador Kirkpatrick remarks that we ought not to reject the alliance of autocratic or authoritarian states (as distinguished from totalist regimes), which share with America the will to resist communism and the Soviet Union. So ought she not to base her argument for legitimacy upon the existence of constitutional government or constitutional order, justice, and freedom, or representative government, or simply tolerable government, rather than insisting upon an abstract democracy?

For the word democracy has come to resemble an old hat that everybody wears and nobody respects. As she observes herself, some of the most oppressive regimes in our world pretend to be democracies. And have not democracies often been unholy alliances between a successful demagogue and a greedy mob?

Is the government of Saudi Arabia — distinctly not democratic — less legitimate than the government of the typical Marxist “people’s republic”? Is the government of Israel, a garrison state, illegitimate because it excludes from full civic participation one-fifth of its population on ethnic and religious grounds — scarcely a democratic principle of just government.

**A Quasi-Religion.** Most of the world never was satisfactorily democratic in the past, is distinctly undemocratic today, and has no prospect of decent democracy in the future. Were the United States to insist upon the attainment of democracy (plus capitalism) by every nation-state with which it has satisfactory relations, before long its principal trading partner might be Switzerland. The United States cannot be forever unsettling the governments of client states, or small countries, or of allies, on the ground that they are not sufficiently democratic in obedience to the doctrines of Rousseau, or that they “discriminate” against somebody or other, or that they prefer traditional economies to a full-blown abstract capitalism. One thinks of the aphorism of Vietnam’s Madame Nhu: “If you have the United States for a friend, you don’t need any enemies.” Successful foreign policy, like political success generally, is produced through the art of the possible — not through ideological rigidity. It will not do for the Department of State to repeat, like an incantation, “Democracy good, all other government bad.”

In short, I am saying that a quasi-religion of Democratic Capitalism cannot do duty for imagination and right reason and prescriptive wisdom, in domestic politics or in foreign relations. An ideology of Democratic Capitalism might be less malign than an ideology of Communism or National Socialism or Syndicalism or Anarchism, but it would not be much more intelligent or humane.



You will have gathered, ladies and gentlemen, that I am disappointed, generally speaking, with the Neoconservative faction. I had hope that they might bring lively imagination into the conservative camp; instead, they have urged conservatives to engage in ideological sloganizing, the death of political imagination.

**Dull Standardization.** I had expected the Neoconservatives to address themselves to the great social difficulties of the U.S. today, especially to the swelling growth of a dismal urban proletariat, and the decay of the moral order. Instead, with some exceptions, their concern has been mainly with the gross national product and with “global wealth.” They offer few alternatives to the alleged benefits of the Welfare State, shrugging their shoulders; and the creed of most of them is no better than a latter-day Utilitarianism.

I had thought that the Neoconservatives might become the champions of diversity in the world; instead, they aspire to bring about a world of uniformity and dull standardization,

Americanized, industrialized, democratized, logicalized, boring. They are cultural and economic imperialists, many of them.

I had conjectured that the Neoconservatives might be so many new brooms sweeping clean: that they would set new standards of political rectitude, and leaven healthily the lump of the stolid conservative interest. Instead, they have behaved rather as if they were the cadre of a political machine of a type all too frequently encountered in American political history — eager for place and preferment and power, skillful at intrigue, ready to exclude from office any persons who might not be counted upon as faithful to the Neoconservative ideology. Often, backstairs, they have seemed more eager to frustrate their allies than to confute those presumptive adversaries the liberals and radicals. The strategy of Volpone or of Sir Giles Overreach, nevertheless, may prove vain in the long run; and so it is coming to pass nowadays with the Neoconservatives.

**Clever Creatures.** Do I then write “Ichabod!” upon the lot of them? Nay, not so. Among them, as I mentioned earlier, are men and women who have risen superior to the foibles and fallacies that have marred the Neoconservative clique generally; and it would be a great pity for the American nation to lose the talents of such people. And whatever blunders the Neoconservatives have made from time to time, all the same they have stirred up some intellectual activity among conservatives generally, not an easy thing to do.

In *The Wall Street Journal*, on August 22, 1988, Mr. Irving Kristol expressed his concern as to whether Mr. George Bush has the motivation to learn anything, and disparaged “managerial skills” in government. He urged the appointment to cabinet posts of “superior academics” — presumably of the Kristol kidney. “For the real political talents,” Mr. Kristol wrote in a revealing passage, “are quick-wittedness, articulateness, a clear sense of one’s ideological agenda and the devious routes necessary for its enactment.” Machiavelli!

Such have been the talents of the Neoconservatives in Washington during the past eight years — clever creatures, glib, committed to an ideology, and devious at attaining their objects. The seven cardinal virtues go unmentioned by Mr. Kristol. (The virtue of prudence, according to both Plato and Burke, is the virtue most needed in the statesman.) Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge, Neoconservatives? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

**Playing the Comic Role.** Mr. Bush, not grown up in the backbiting ideological jungle of New York City, seems unlikely to accept Mr. Kristol’s councils of deviousness. For George Bush is no ideologue and no intellectual, praise be: rather, he is, as Kristol writes, “a fine gentleman of good breeding, a true patriot, an experienced, reliable and trustworthy public servant.” Later in the same article, incidentally, Mr. Kristol makes it clear enough that he is no respecter of fine gentlemen: he commends Mrs. Thatcher for having in her cabinet “none of the traditional aristocratic coloration,” and rejoices that the Conservative majority in the House of Commons has fewer members “who have gone to Eton or Harrow, Oxford or Cambridge.”

It is a reasonable presumption that Mr. Kristol and certain of his colleagues would prefer to install in the White House some person, not at all a fine gentleman, who might be deviously manipulated by Neoconservative ideologues. Mr. Bush has far too much practical

experience of federal office to be so managed by the “first-class academic ‘brain trust’” that Mr. Kristol desires to establish in the White House. “In politics, the professor always plays the comic role,” Nietzsche wrote. So it is coming to pass with the Neoconservatives, of whose “guiding vision” the Bush people are healthily skeptical.

**No Promise for Neoliberalism.** Do I think, what with my mordant comments in this series of four lectures on the Cultural Conservatives, the Libertarians, popular conservatism, and the Neoconservatives, that the conservative movement, near the end of the year 1988, is in the sere and yellow leaf, a mere congeries of warring factions, doomed to early dissolution as a political force? Not at all. Already, despite the complexion of the majority in Congress, the conservatives are dominant in the country. The Democratic candidates for office now find it necessary, nationally, to pretend to be conservatives; a number of Democratic aspirants to office actually have turned conservative. No longer is there talk of the promise of Neoliberalism.

On the contrary, during the next four years we will benefit as a people, I think, from a prudent conservative administration that has gained confidence and practical abilities from the eight years of Mr. Reagan’s success. It will not be a Neoconservative administration; yet neither will it be an administration from which honest Neoconservatives are excluded. Able cultural conservatives, and sensible libertarians, and plain mainstream conservatively minded politicians will have their places in such an administration. Let us pray that the conservative movement of the 1990s will resemble Cicero’s *Optimates* — “the party of all good men.” Some of us, once upon a time, had fixed lifelong in our brains by the standard exercises in typewriting manuals Cicero’s exhortation “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party.” This day I do similarly exhort you, ladies and gentlemen — yea, even the publicans, sinners, and Neoconservatives in your midst.

