CHAPTER SIX

Neoconservatism's Liberal Legacy

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"NEOCONSERVATISM" IS THE NAME of a robust strain in American intellectual life and American politics, a strain with a very rich history. But although even some of its leading figures over the years have pronounced the end of neoconservatism and therefore, presumably, the end of "the neoconservatives," usually on grounds of its and their merger with (or perhaps takeover of) the conservative mainstream, the term remains very much alive. This is especially true when used to describe a certain group of people who have sought to influence American public policy, most notably foreign policy in the post–cold war era, and who, in the administration of George W. Bush, obtained that influence.

One might, therefore, begin a consideration of neoconservatism with its rich history—or, in the alternative, with its contemporary influence. I propose to do neither (though I will indeed touch upon the past and the present). Instead, I explore here its future—specifically, the ways in which neoconservatism has evolved according to its own premises in the direction of a current and future politics dedicated to the preservation and extension of liberal order, properly understood. To get to neoconservatism's liberal legacy, however, it is

necessary to begin with liberalism's origins in the nature of politics itself.

A Short Derivation of Liberalism

No single political view ever amounts to the *totality* of politics. Politics is, in a fundamental sense, about the management of difference and disagreement. If everyone shared the same interests, or thought exactly the same thing about all subjects of any importance, politics would be *unnecessary* (indeed, impossible). Short of that, if everyone agreed on a method for resolving all disputes that might arise between any given two people, politics would be *completed*, in the sense that relations between any given two people would either be correct (agreement) or would be subject to mutually accepted juridical mechanisms (in short, agreement over what to do about disagreement).[1]

We have certainly seen instances in which governments have sought to expunge disagreement from politics: this is the history of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Stripped of its police powers, this totalitarianism is nothing other than the insistence that there is *one* correct answer to *all* relevant questions, that it is known to the state, and that no other answer is legitimate. But, of course, it makes no sense to speak of totalitarianism stripped of its police powers, because in the absence of agreement, the only way to promote uniformity of view is through repression. In fact, a politics of repression, while denying the existence of disagreement, actually presupposes disagreement, otherwise no repression would be necessary.

In the United States—though, of course, not only in the United States—disagreement manifests itself most broadly in the rejection of one or the other or both of the two major political parties. But political disagreement can hardly be said to end there. Within each major

1. For a rigorous analysis of juridical relations, see Alexandre Kojève, *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*, trans. Bryan-Paul Frost and Robert Howse (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

political party, there are, broadly speaking, two wings, which reflect internal disagreement about the direction the party should take. Within each of the wings, some consider themselves harder-line and some consider themselves more moderate. Indeed, for every "on the one hand," there is an "on the other hand," all the way down to any given two people—which is to say, any given two people are different. (Even people who are in agreement agree about *something*: they agree in relation to some thing or things but not in relation to all things. The two people are not the same, and they understand each other to differ from one another. However much you and I agree, if I am hungry, it is a matter of consequence to me whether I myself eat or you do. We cannot agree that I am you and you are me.)

It is therefore not difficult to see that politics is constituted by the interaction of various contending points of view—that is, disagreement—and the resolution of this disagreement in the here and now. Political history is a record of the interaction and working out of the disagreements of the moment, whether this management of disagreement takes the form of world war, revolution, the convening of a council of elders, an election, a vote in parliament, arbitration, or the drawing of straws.

I would venture to say that in a reasonably well-ordered democratic polity, which I take the United States to be, the major poles of disagreement, in this case the Democratic and Republican Parties, tend to balance one another over time, making adjustments in relation to what they stand for in order to broaden their appeal to voters. And we are better off with a politics in which Democrats and Republicans contend than we would be if either one or the other won "once and for all." In fact, one could look at the evolution of the positions of the two parties over time as a continuous rebalancing, helping to ensure that no permanent victor emerges. Of course, this is not what the politicians see themselves as doing: they are looking for votes. Some hard-line partisans—those who entertain the view that all members of the other party are either wicked or stupid or ignorant or

deluded or in some other fashion entirely wrong—entertain fantasies about total victory, the final vanquishing of the other party. But just the same, the way in which they look for votes seems to have the effect of creating a continuous rebalancing. The specific strength of this liberal democratic politics in the context of procuring agreement is that (rhetorical heat notwithstanding) each party feels vested in the system, even in the face of defeat, because of the hope and expectation of eventual victory. Politicians may be looking to win "once and for all," but the losing party at the polls in any given election will never declare it has been defeated "once and for all." On the contrary, loser and winner both look to the next election.

Although neither party may reasonably expect victory "once and for all," in the United States there are, in fact, many formerly political questions that appear to have been resolved "once and for all" by the emergence of complete agreement. For example, slavery is no longer a political question because no one proposes to bring it back. Even those who insist that Aristotle and Nietzsche be given their due in full do not suggest that these philosophers' analyses of the rank order of human souls require latter-day advocacy of slavery so that the slavish can be the slaves they should be. Other matters of complete agreement include the following propositions: States may not secede from the Union. Women have equal rights in the workplace. Dueling is not an acceptable means to settle disputes. Parental rights over children are limited in that parents may not, for example, dispose of unwanted female infants. The change from a $20 bill I receive in Washington, D.C., I can spend in Palo Alto, California.[2] These "once and for all" issues are usually codified as matters of law or right, but they are also firmly entrenched as social practice quite apart from their legal status. It would not occur to an aspiring politician to make his central issue the desirability of his state's secession from the United

2. The complicated web of relations embodied in the use of paper money is one of John R. Searle's main examples in *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

States. He would be dismissed as a crackpot.[3] The proof of this is the absence, for more than a century, of any such character in American politics.

It is not enough to argue that politics is driven by human difference and has as its task the management of the disagreement ensuing from difference; that a politics of repression, however brutal, cannot hope in the end to overcome difference by imposing agreement; and that the only hope for a successful politics is one that creates the conditions in which people can accept and respect difference, each with regard to the other—which is to say, respect each other's freedom. In addition, one must observe that a person desires not merely freedom for the moment but rather lasting freedom. Unless such a person is prepared to try to secure his or her freedom by force, the only way to secure it is through mutual recognition of the freedom of another, notwithstanding the *difference* of the other—in other words, recognition of the *freedom and equality* of the other. A person recognizes the freedom and equality of the other as the condition of the other's recognition of his or her freedom and equality. The mutual recognition of each as free and equal I take to be the *constitutive* characteristic of liberalism.

Yet freedom and equality do not necessarily go together. To pick an extreme example, a tyrant may be free in that he has the power to compel others to do what he wishes, whereas no one else has the power to compel him to act against his own wishes. One can also imagine (in fact, one can turn to history rather than the imagination) an equality that seeks to obliterate all difference manifesting itself as freedom. In a liberal society, however, *liberal politics* is a matter of balancing the competing claims of the desire for freedom and the

3. He would be dismissed not so much because of his view as because of his insistence on taking his view to the public square, that is, on making it a political issue. Princeton University's Peter Singer, for example, famously made the case for a right to infanticide. But he never ran for public office on that platform, prefering instead to advocate his views from the position of his chair in bioethics.

desire for equality. The highest good of liberal society is neither simply freedom nor simply equality but the blend of the two as freedom *and* equality. The balance one seeks is "as much freedom as is consistent with equality," where equality is understood to be the mutual recognition of freedom.

But what about demands for freedom that might impinge upon the equality of all? Or demands made in the name of equality that may impinge upon freedom? These are precisely the dangers that inhere in liberal politics. They amount to the risk that liberal society contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. Even if this were true of a particular liberal society, it would not affect my judgment that liberalism counts as the final answer in politics—mutual recognition of the freedom and equality of each as the highest possible human political achievement. By "possible," I mean that there is no obstacle, in principle, to universal liberalism in this sense becoming actual. But what is true of liberal*ism* is not necessarily true of any given liberal society or state. There is, unfortunately, no available guarantee that the advantageous balance of disagreement that liberalism generally manages to strike will hold in all cases.[4]

People may press for freedoms that are inconsistent with the claims of equality, essentially by seeking recognition for the special claims of those who are unwilling to grant recognition of the equality of others in return. In this way, a liberal society risks empowering the illiberal—those who would take advantage of the benefits available in a society of free and equal persons who mutually recognize their freedom and equality by using that freedom for the purpose of pressing their *exclusive* (i.e., anti-egalitarian) claims upon that society.

Likewise, people in a liberal society may make demands pertaining to equality that impinge excessively upon the freedom of individuals. I have been describing equality in formal terms: mutual recognition.

4. A chilling account of the breakdown of liberal order is available in Howard M. Sachar, *Dreamland: Europeans and Jews in the Aftermath of the Great War* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

But it is clear that equality has content as well. As to the precise nature of that content, I am not prepared to state a case here, for reasons to which I shall return. I do not think, however, that we will find the answer through recourse to a Rawlsian "original position,"[5] which I would characterize as a noble attempt to squeeze from politics its very essence—namely, difference and the disagreement that attends it. Nor do I think we will find the answer in the opposite insistence that equality remain merely formal and that no social claims against individuals be allowed in the name of equality, as, for example, Robert Nozick would argue.[6] The truth lies somewhere between, in the strong sense that *all* extant liberal societies do in fact strike a balance between freedom and equality. One might add that states *differ* in where they strike it while still retaining an essentially liberal character. It is also worth noting that states *restrike* it and restrike it again over time.

Is this ongoing rebalancing directional in character? Does it point to an end? I think the evidence suggests it does. Again, this evidence takes the form of the seemingly permanent disappearance of disagreement about certain things that used to be contentious. We have discussed the disappearance of disagreement over slavery. It seems unlikely to me that anyone in a liberal society (more precisely, any liberal in a liberal society, which is to say, a society in which the illiberal are absent or marginalized) will ever try to take away women's right to vote. There will be no movement for a constitutional amendment overturning the Supreme Court and imposing a ban on sodomy. But note again that the directionality is neither simply toward more and more freedom nor simply toward more and more equality. I do not think there will come a time when expanding demands for freedom produce the return of smoking on airplanes. Although each of

5. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard, 1971), 118–83.

6. "The minimal state is the most extensive state that can be justified. Any state more extensive violates people's rights." Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 149.

these two desires is present in liberal societies, once again, it is the balance between the two that matters, that moves, and that defines a direction.

One could say that one favors individual freedom as long as it does not impinge on the freedom of others, but this has the unfortunate effect of bringing the discussion to a halt at precisely the point at which it becomes interesting because it is difficult. It seems to me that what is emerging is a balance between socially validated (i.e., mutually recognized and mutually practiced) individual rights and individual responsibilities. The endpoint would accordingly be a condition in which, as a matter of everyday practice, people acted in accordance with their responsibilities in the expectation that others would act in accordance with their responsibilities. "Rights" as things in need of protection would disappear, as would "politics" in the sense used here—namely, as the management of disagreement—because disagreement would give way to agreement (including agreement to disagree and mutually agreed juridical mechanisms for the resolution of remaining disputes).[7]

I have offered here a formal account of the endpoint. I cannot give the content of the endpoint (though it is interesting to speculate). I am not, however, obliged to try to do so, because an adequate formal account is sufficient. As a matter of social practice, however, until we reach the endpoint,[8] there will be cases in which the demand for

7. I grant that this endpoint presupposes a world in which a person's responsibilities are nonconflicting. The point is that I am giving an account of how such a world comes about—in essence, how we get to agreement about what constitutes an impermissible infringement on someone else's freedom.

8. The question of how we know we have reached the endpoint is interesting. The epistemological problem is that the reappearance of disagreement is proof that we have not, but the continuation of agreement is not proof that we have. As a practical matter, it strikes me that it will become harder and harder to deny that the endpoint has been achieved. Another way to put this is that phenomenologically, the "endpoint" can only be perceived as something one is approaching asymptotically: One knows what it is but not when one has arrived at it, even though the suspicion that one has indeed arrived grows and grows. The final state of political

equality will indeed impinge excessively on freedom, just as in other cases the demand for freedom will impinge on equality.

We arrive, therefore, at our politics of the future: because we favor freedom and equality, and as a consequence of our general support for efforts to extend freedom and equality, we must also oppose such demands for equality that impinge excessively on freedom and oppose such demands for freedom that impinge excessively on equality.

Whether one wishes to call this position "neoconservative" or something else, it is both "neo" and "conservative" in the sense that what is being conserved is our liberalism—its extension in time and space. The distinction between this "neoconservative" position and a "progressive" position amounts to the weight one attaches to two sets of claims. One set, the "progressive," manifests itself as the demand for expanded freedom *or* the demand for greater substantive equality in the particular case at hand (that is, in the object of a political dispute). The other set, "neoconservative," concerns itself with whether a demand for greater freedom might impinge excessively on substantive equality or whether a demand for greater substantive equality might impinge excessively on freedom. If neoconservatism has a claim for the superiority of its outlook, it is that the desire for freedom and the desire for equality are always present in liberal societies and liberal politics (indeed, they are the raw material of liberal society), whereas the striking of an acceptable balance between the two is not a given but a matter to be worked out by politics—a politics that can go badly wrong when the balance is wrongly struck, potentially with disastrously illiberal consequences.

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dialogue, which is to say the articulation of difference, will accordingly be between those who think the end has arrived and those who think one cannot say. This should allay all concern that the future will be boring, because this dialogue is nothing other than the continuation of the debate over the possibility of absolute wisdom. This is a debate we have been having since Hegel claimed to possess such wisdom. Hegel is doing very well in this debate, with little help from his friends—far better than he seemed to be doing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In any case, the debate has not been boring.

The Turn to "Reality"

Any reading of the intellectual history of the tendency known as "neoconservatism" will quickly reveal that its leading figures cannot fairly be said to have seen matters in the light I am describing. At the same time, it is quite possible to see in their thinking many of the seeds of our current and future politics, the conservation of liberalism. I don't intend to offer anything like a systematic or comprehensive survey. I rather sketch the ways in which certain ideas propagated mainly by a loose group of New York intellectuals prove antecedent to what I am describing here.

It is not at all difficult to see that neoconservatism, as it emerged in the 1960s, was first of all a response to postwar American political liberalism, a sufficiently widely held secular faith as to constitute almost a consensus politics. An essential characteristic of that political liberalism was its faith that government intervention on a sufficiently large scale could solve, or at least ameliorate, the effects of the social problems of the day, especially poverty and racial discrimination. Postwar political liberalism also had an international component, including the assertive use of American power in the containment of the Soviet Union and, more generally, in defense of a liberal and liberalizing "free world." (This picture would become more complicated, of course, with Vietnam and the emergence of a left-wing American politics sharply critical of American power abroad and the justice of the American regime at home.)

Now, this postwar political liberalism has only a tenuous connection to liberalism in the broader sense in which I am using the term; but there is a connection nonetheless. The raw material of liberalism, the fraternal desires for freedom and equality, are intrinsically expansionist in character and point to a limit—namely, the claim that freedom and equality are universal goods.[9] To the extent that the political

9. If a balanced freedom and equality constitute the highest good in politics—

liberals of the postwar era made sweeping claims about universals, they were speaking the language of liberalism in its classical or broader sense. Thus, in a sense, neoconservatism began as a dialogue with liberalism and, in fact, emerged out of it—something old-style conservatives would never say of themselves.[10] In fact, once radical politics supplanted or transformed the meaning of postwar liberalism for the Left, a common refrain among the neoconservatives was that they had not changed, but liberalism had.

In Irving Kristol's famous definition, a neoconservative is "a liberal who has been mugged by reality." This is to say, certain stubborn facts about the world did violence to the optimistic aspirations of postwar political liberalism. This point is important for two reasons: First, it places the here and now front and center. Upon the (in principle) universal aspirations of liberalism and upon the current goals of liberal public policy, reality impinges, sometimes decisively.

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the final answer, as I have claimed—then there is no basis for a claim that one human being should be treated as an equal but another one should not, or that one is entitled to freedom but the other is not, except in cases where the other's desire for freedom is unaccompanied by a desire for equality, or vice versa.

10. As to whether the old-style conservatives are correct, that is a different matter. Harvey Mansfield distinguished "the modern conservatism that accompanies liberalism from the classical conservatism that preceded liberalism," arguing that the modern sort of conservative, "unlike Burke, does not know what he shares with liberalism." Harvey C. Mansfield Jr., *The Spirit of Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), x. I would think that a serious challenge to liberalism would have to involve a repudiation of its constitutive characteristics, namely, the desires for freedom and equality and the directionality toward a limit condition of universality thereby implied. That repudiation, in turn, would seem to me to entail a defense of inequality and of freedom only for the highest type, as well as an according rejection of any extension of the privileges earned by the strengths of the highest beyond their ranks. Nietzsche attempted this as philosophy, and the Nazis as politics. But what connection these efforts have with anything in contemporary conservatism is hard to see. In William F. Buckley Jr.'s adage that a conservative stands athwart history shouting "stop," there would not seem to be much expectation of success in stopping history. It is more an articulation of an attitude toward acquiescence. And even my formal description here of what a repudiation of liberalism might entail does not escape the horizon of liberalism itself but rather takes its shape from an understanding of the character of liberalism.

The getting from here to there is not a matter simply of will or declaration; rather, it entails resistance of a kind both foreseeable and unforeseeable. A policy that purports to compel a certain behavior en route to a certain outcome may or may not so compel the behavior and achieve the desired outcome. And in accordance with the law of unintended consequences, the most consequential outcomes may be far different from those the policy makers sought. A jobs training program (to pick one policy area out of multitudes discussed, especially in the pages of the *Public Interest*) does not necessarily result in (1) an individual trained to do a job and, further, (2) employment for the individual trained.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this turn—the neoconservative turn—in thinking about public policy. It is often described as a preference for "empirical" tests of policy outcomes. The juxtaposition is as against, on one hand, the naïve assumption that intention equals result (jobs training is "good" because people lack the skills they need to get jobs, and training will give them those skills) and, on the other, objections to policy proposals based solely on first principles. Jobs training cannot "work" because of the intrinsic incompetence of government; jobs training is no business of government in any case; innovation in policy will, in all likelihood (if not in all cases), make matters worse. Instead of settling policy matters by having ideologues argue over principle—and it is probably no accident that conservatives were losing those arguments—social scientists would step in to investigate whether social programs were delivering on the promises advocates made on their behalf and would test for other, perhaps unanticipated, effects.

This description of neoconservativism was, and is, popular among those who identify themselves as neoconservatives,[11] and it is true as far as it goes. But a critical engagement with it is also necessary. Soon

11. See, for example, Adam Wolfson, "Conservatives and Neoconservatives," *Public Interest* 154 (Spring 2003).

enough, the weight of empirical evidence led to *neoconservative* generalizations—which is to say, cases in principle—about which social policy approaches would or would not work. Such generalizations were inevitable insofar as questions about whether to adopt a particular public policy were politically salient: one could be neutral, but the proposition that only after adopting a policy can one properly evaluate it is indistinguishable from acquiescence in its adoption. Neoconservatives believed they had good reason to oppose certain kinds of policy proposals based on previous empirical experience. What began (in some cases) as an attempt to get past ideology (liberal or conservative) through empirical tests of "what works" became ideological in its own right, as neoconservatives, no less than others, took positions based on (empirically derived, or at least empirically justified) principle. Although the result may have been richer and more sophisticated analysis and argument, any notion that empirical approaches could altogether displace preference based on principles was mistaken.

And what was this emergent preference? I think it is not unfair to describe the neoconservative conclusion as follows: Reality is such that efforts to alter it result in its mugging you—often enough, that is, to render such efforts dubious at best. One should reduce one's ambitions accordingly.

The essential contribution of the neoconservative turn was to introduce reality (how things are) as a counterweight to aspiration (what you want)—in this case, postwar liberal aspiration. This turn was an extraordinary achievement and produced profound effects, most notably, a scaling back on unreasonable expectations about the state's ability to impose social change. But it was incomplete. Here, "reality" was presented as something unchanging and rigid. But do we really want to say that of reality? Certainly, the past is fixed, has shaped the present, and weighs heavily on the future. And the *idea* of reality is unchanging. But the *reality* of reality—which is to say its content, unfolding in the here and now—does change. This opens

up possibilities: if *what you want* (a change) is in accordance with *how things are*, then you can have your change. Reality not only resists but also enables change. The task, then, becomes the examination of the content of reality to determine which attempts to change it would be in accordance with it—that is, inhere in it—and which attempted changes would run counter to it (and be mugged by it).[12]

I submit that we have now arrived at (or returned to) the political task of our liberalism, namely, balancing the desire for freedom and the desire for equality. The proper response to a mugging by reality is not the abandonment of liberalism, broadly construed, in favor of a preliberal or antiliberal or "conservative" alternative, neo- or otherwise, but rather the abandonment of those elements (rife in postwar liberalism) that reality would not accommodate in favor of those that reality would accommodate and, indeed, compel. This is our current and future politics.

The Resilience of the Liberal Economic Order

From its early years, neoconservativism was engaged across the full range of public policy matters, domestic (especially in the *Public Interest*) and foreign (especially in *Commentary*). There were self-identified neoconservative scholars of welfare and education and housing and crime policy, of Latin America and arms control and the Soviet Union. But any serious review of the main currents of the substance of neoconservative thought (as opposed to its "empirical" methodology, discussed above) would have no difficulty quickly identifying two central and related themes: the neoconservative critique of capitalism

12. One could say this in a more technical fashion by adopting Hegel's terminology: The Concept is in accord with itself. There is unity of essence (what is) and existence (that is). Needless to say, this has been a matter of some philosophical controversy in the years since. One could, with some justice, characterize the history of philosophy since Hegel as a series of confrontations with this proposition.

and the neoconservative revitalization of anticommunism during the cold war.

The neoconservative critique of capitalism[13] drew heavily on Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In the neoconservative view, capitalism—salutary though it was with respect to the efficient allocation of goods and services and accordingly unparalleled as a means for the advancement of people's material prosperity—was in crisis. The source of this crisis was the deficiency of self-propulsion of capitalism itself. Capitalism, in this view, required something neither contained within nor perpetuated by its system of market economics. This "something" was, in effect, Weber's Protestant ethic: a set of virtues or habits of character—including thrift, industry, temperance, patience, persistence, and so forth—whose origin and sustenance came from religious faith and the expectation of salvation as a reward for right earthly conduct. In the absence of these virtues, capitalism could not flourish. Yet capitalism itself did nothing to encourage the virtues upon which it depended. On the contrary, in certain respects, capitalist consumer society worked to undermine those virtues. Whereas once Americans thought it morally praiseworthy and necessary to save money for future consumption, with the arrival of installment credit in the early twentieth century, the habit of deferred gratification gave way to a demand for instant gratification. In the long run, the demand for instant gratification would subvert properly functioning markets and the long-term time horizon required for the success of capitalism.

The neoconservative critique of capitalism did not see its contradictions resulting in a proletarian revolution, ushering in a new stage of history. But neither did it counter Marxist claims to that effect with the simple pronouncement that the market was all right. Capi-

13. For the definitive articulation of the neoconservative critique of capitalism, see Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), and the essays collected in Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

talism, in the neoconservative view, was indeed problematic. As to what might follow from its further collapse under the weight of its cultural contradictions, the neoconservative critique offered no certain vision beyond a general portrait of decadence and stagnation. There was also an essential ambiguity in the neoconservative critique over the inevitability of capitalism's decline. On one hand, the conclusion that follows from the premise of the argument would seem to be that decline is inevitable. On the other, there was the possibility that capitalism might find renewed spirit (at least for a time) through the cultivation or recultivation of precisely those Protestant virtues that marked its rise.

So it was that the theorizing yielded a political agenda, namely, the need for a robust defense of ordinary, bourgeois life. As a type, the bourgeois has been under attack for centuries—starting with Rousseau, who identified the species as a timid and diminished human type; later, and perhaps most famously, by Marx as the tool and dupe of a capitalist economic order that in turn would fall to proletarian revolution, taking the bourgeoisie down with it. Most recently, an assault on bourgeois life was at the heart of the emergence of the 1960s counterculture and the beginning of its institutionalization in the 1970s.

But, the neoconservatives asked, was this bourgeois fellow really so bad, so base as all that? Was he not, in fact, the living repository of the "values" or virtues that enabled the capitalist system to persist? And were those values not, upon closer examination, morally preferable on their own terms to the relativism and even nihilism often embraced by his critics? Were the critics not, in certain respects, the material beneficiaries of the very values for which they had such contempt? And was our bourgeois not, therefore, worth defending against a pitiless cultural assault on the moral legitimacy of his very existence? And if, in turn, the bourgeois type could be defended in such a fashion as to allow for the "moral capital" of capitalism to remain sufficient for the operation of the system, then it became possible to

envision a future for capitalism that was not quite so gloomy. This was all the more so if there were specific policy measures one might identify as contributing to the decline of moral capital—for example, those encouraging able-bodied people to rely on the state for sustenance. With the reversal of these poor policy choices, one might envision a certain amount of "remoralization," though, again, it is rather difficult to say whether the neoconservative critique as a theoretical proposition could allow for anything but eventual decline.

As it happened, by the mid-1980s, many of those traveling under the "neoconservative" label (whether they did so voluntarily or not) had abandoned the original neoconservative critique of capitalism. There were, no doubt, many reasons for abandoning it, including the abatement of inflation and the beginning of a long period of economic growth following the 1982 recession. Stagnation and decline no longer looked to be quite so certain an eventual future as they did in the 1970s. Moreover, with the arrival of glasnost and perestroika in Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union, centrally planned economies no longer looked to be at all a viable alternative to, even if a poorer performer than, market economies. It became increasingly clear that central planning was a route to economic disaster. The notion that a centrally planned system was somehow going to displace the market systems that were doing so well became less and less plausible.

I think, however, that the most important reason for the neoconservative abandonment of the neoconservative critique of capitalism is that it became harder and harder to find evidence regarding the "depleting moral capital" of capitalism. I do not mean by this that capitalism came somehow to be regarded as a source of moral regeneration or of morality (though some were willing to go that far); I only mean that the system's potential for self-perpetuation became more evident. In practice, the system did not lack, but rather seemed to embody, whatever "ethic" was necessary to propel market economies. This "ethic," moreover, was looking less and less Protestant in

character and more and more entrepreneurial, involving the acceptance of risk in exchange for the prospect of reward.[14]

I take this view of the resilience of capitalism and market economics to be conventional wisdom now—and, moreover, to be correct. There is no longer any serious expectation of proletarian revolution, nor even of a widespread return, for political reasons, to the poor policy choices underlying centrally planned economies. "Globalization," which I take to be the uneven spread across the globe of capitalist accumulation of surplus, continues to press against the resistance of local custom and generally to prevail over it or to devise a local compromise. Antiglobalization protests are often incoherent, expressing numerous demands that the capitalist system itself would be in the best position to satisfy. For a truly alternative vision of how the world should be ordered, one must look to the likes of Osama bin Laden, and then one must ask how likely it is that his vision will prevail.

The historical importance of the neoconservative critique of capitalism was, I think, as an intellectual way station for sensible minds looking critically at the world around them and seeing, against the weight of all regnant theory, that capitalism or market economics worked rather well indeed. Perhaps the system is eventually doomed to collapse under the weight of its cultural contradictions—but not necessarily *soon*, and not beyond the ability of sound public policy to effect a delay. The sensible mind having been opened to the possibility that the system was not so quickly destined for the ash heap of history, it was thereby opened to the possibility that the system was not destined for the ash heap of history at all.

Once again, another real strength emerging here is the reconnection of capitalism to the real world: Rather than viewing the question of the future of capitalism in terms of dialectical materialism—or

14. I reviewed the neconservative critique of capitalism at greater length in Tod Lindberg, "Four Cheers for Capitalism," *Commentary* 79, no. 4 (April 1985), in which I also laid out the objection to the Weberian perspective discussed here.

perhaps the minority alternative, of capitalism as a "natural" phenomenon except when undone by poor policy choices, or "government" more broadly—we begin to see a serious inquiry into what sort of creatures these participants in market economies really are. We see here a political dimension to the economic question. It will come as no great surprise that the content of that social dimension is our liberalism, the balancing of freedom and equality that the marketplace presupposes.

Extending the Liberal Space

The demise of Soviet communism substantially validated the triumph (if not the triumphalism) of capitalism. But though we can say that the revitalized anticommunism of neoconservatism abetted in the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, we must also note that neoconservatism never predicted those outcomes. At best, I think, neoconservatives pinned their hopes on the continued success and prosperity of the free world, the containment of Communist expansion, and perhaps the hope that the territory of the free world might expand; in any case, the Brezhnev Doctrine—that once a country became Communist, it would remain so—had to be rejected in principle and resisted where practical. But this never amounted to a hope, let alone an expectation, that capitalism was on the brink of worldwide triumph.

One defining characteristic of neoconservative anticommunism was its moralism,[15] which had two components. The first was a conviction, again running contrary to prevailing intellectual trends, that

15. The central figure in the neoconservative revitalization of anticommunism is Norman Podhoretz, both in his own writings and as editor of *Commentary*. See, for example, Norman Podhoretz, *The Present Danger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980). For an explicitly moral critique of the realpolitik approach as exemplified by Henry Kissinger, see Norman Podhoretz, "Kissinger Reconsidered," *Commentary* 73, no. 6 (June 1982).

democratic government of the sort practiced in the United States was worth defending on grounds of its moral superiority to competing models. Democracy, contra Winston Churchill, was not the worst form of government except for all the others; instead, it actually reflected and protected the human desire for freedom or liberty in a way that deserved recognition as "good." Concomitant with this view, though by no means a necessary corollary of it and perhaps, if anything, even more contrary to prevailing intellectual opinion, was the conviction that American power had, by and large, been a force for good in the world, remained so, and ought to be increased to confront the Soviet threat.

The second component was the conviction that communism was singularly evil and, indeed, in the world of the cold war, uniquely evil. Of course, the idea that communism was morally odious was hardly a neoconservative invention. "Godless communism" had been a staple of the rhetoric of the 1950s. The neoconservative moral vision was both secular and more thoroughly grounded in political theory.[16] Communism was a form of totalitarianism, the assertion by the state of control over all aspects of people's lives. Traditional authoritarian regimes, so the neoconservative argument ran, punished political dissent severely but often left open spheres of activity—for example, economic life and family life—in which people were able to act relatively freely. Totalitarian states sought to obliterate these spheres of freedom in the interest of greater control over their subjects' lives.

It was thus possible to assert a rank order among regime type: democracy, good; authoritarian, ranging from benevolent to brutal dictatorship, not good to bad; totalitarian/communist, worst of all.[17]

16. The most important source being Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

17. The seminal article is Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," *Commentary* 78, no. 5 (November 1979). Kirkpatrick noted the tendency of the left to gloss over the failings of Marxist regimes while drawing attention to the human rights abuses of authoritarian regimes.

And in the context of an expansionist Soviet Union seeking to spread "revolution" throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, this rank order led to a distinctly neoconservative formulation of grand strategy for opposing communism: the United States, for moral reasons and not merely reasons of state, should try to prevent bad regimes from becoming worse regimes, which would thereby further enhance the strategic strength of the very worst regime, the Soviet Union. This policy would necessarily entail support for certain unsavory authoritarian governments in their efforts to combat local Communist insurrections (which, inevitably, traveled under the flag of national liberation movements). In its mature phase, the Reagan Doctrine[18] would entail providing military and other support for armed insurrections aimed at toppling Communist governments.

A detailed critique of the neoconservative view of foreign policy is beyond my scope here. As a second-generation neoconservative myself—one who can now look back from the vantage point of twenty or so years later upon my participation in the neoconservative intellectual scene during its (first) heyday—I would observe that the moralism of neoconservative foreign policy amounted to an overlay upon an essentially "realist" view of international relations. This "realist" grounding lent the project of reinvigorating anticommunism a tough-mindedness that I think was essential in confronting the view that Soviet communism presented no special problem in the world. But one must ask: How realistic—in the sense in which I have been praising the neoconservative reconnection with reality more broadly in this essay—was this grounding realism?

The "realist" school discounts what goes on within the borders of a country, including (from time to time) the stirrings of people for more freedom and better lives for themselves and their children. Although neoconservatives made a place in their analysis for heroic

18. First named and described by Charles Krauthammer in *Time* magazine (May 1, 1985).

individual dissent, in general, the tendency was to take totalitarian (if that term itself is not too abstract) *aspiration* for totalitarian *actuality*. The reality was substantially more complicated than theory might instruct. These countries all had *people* in them, and dividing them simply into two categories, oppressor apparatchik (the state) and hopeless victims (the people), did not do justice to the nuances nor to the possibility of dramatic change. Similarly, though in some cases the insurgents the Reagan Doctrine supported genuinely warranted the designation many neoconservatives applied to them rather broadly—namely, "freedom fighters"—in truth the practical test of the applicability of the term "freedom fighter" was often little more than the willingness to take up arms against Communist governments, not necessarily a commitment to anything like Western-style freedom.

But these retrospective assessments should not obscure either the importance of the classical neoconservative argument in its time or its legacy now. If one takes the argument's main line and merely updates it to take ensuing events into account, the result is quite striking. With the collapse of Soviet communism and, accordingly, of Marxist guerrilla movements operating here and there across the globe, one need no longer worry that authoritarian regimes, as a result of losing such struggles, will go from bad to worse. One is therefore under no moral obligation to provide support for these regimes. On the contrary, the full extent to which they are themselves morally suspect is now unobscured by the specter of something worse, and the authoritarian regimes can be judged accordingly: they are indeed wanting. From here, it is but a short step to support, in principle, universal liberalism—which, it will come as no great surprise, is the foreign-policy endpoint of our future politics.[19]

19. It is no accident that many of the leading neoconservative Cold Warriors, preeminently including Paul Wolfowitz, have emerged at the forefront of the Bush administration's efforts to promote the spread of liberalism and democracy in the Middle East. When Bush speaks in terms of a universal human entitlement to freedom, he is making claims similar to those here.

As it happens, the story is more complicated than that. After all, a worse outcome than an authoritarian regime is certainly possible in some cases. For example, holding an election might result in empowering an Islamist government bent on smothering all liberal sentiment under a blanket of *sharia*. Or an authoritarian government, under pressure to liberalize, might lose its grip altogether, resulting in a failed state prone to lawlessness, warlordism, and misery.

But, of course, to say this is merely to observe that one must be prudent in pursuit of the advance of liberalism—one must be realistic and take local circumstances fully into account; one must be attuned to the difficulty of introducing a balance between the desire for freedom and the desire for equality in places that have little or no experience of the two in relation and may not, in any event, wish this liberalism for themselves. One must not shrink from rejecting such illiberal wishes: Universal liberalism means nothing if it grants exceptions in principle—though, clearly, certain prudential accommodations may be necessary. In the end, however, it is the resolution of disagreement as "agreement to disagree" that most securely protects liberalism. This is no less true in the international context than in the domestic context (and, in my view, provides the only adequate account of the "democratic peace"[20]). If, at home, the politics of the future consists of the conservation of liberalism, abroad the same tendency—whether one wishes to call it "neoconservative" or something else—consists of the prudent promotion of liberalism.

Defending Liberalism Where It Is

Were the Soviet Union still an actor on the world stage, the possibility of universal liberalism might yet be concealed by the "realist" understanding of a bipolar world order and the reality of proxy conflict

20. I have developed this point at greater length in "The Atlanticist Community" in *Beyond Paradise and Power: Europeans, Americans and the Future of a Troubled Partenership*, ed. Tod Lindberg (New York: Routledge, 2004).

with the nuclear-armed USSR. One might find oneself content with a truncated vision of the possibility of liberalism—namely, with its flourishing in one's own political community but not, perhaps, elsewhere.

Neoconservatism generally shared in this sense of American exceptionalism. In the first place, the neoconservative intellectuals truly did feel "at home" in America. To the extent that a sense of alienation or critical distance from American society or government was a characteristic of previous generations of intellectuals, the neoconservatives well and truly repudiated it.[21] They were unabashed partisans of the American side because they thought the United States best embodied (*did* embody) the ideals for which they stood: liberty, equality of opportunity,[22] and so on. Moreover, they believed the United States had a unique role to play in the protection of and (to the extent possible) the spread of freedom on account of its position as a global power. This had been true throughout the twentieth century and remained true through the years of "superpower rivalry" (a term that risked a bristling response from neoconservatives because of its unstated premise—namely, the supposed "moral equivalence" of the two superpowers). The ability of the United States to project power

21. See *Our Country and Our Culture* (New York: Orwell Press, 1983). The volume is edited proceedings of a conference of the Committee for the Free World.

22. Neoconservatives liked to distinguish between the desire for equality of opportunity, which they favored, and the desire for equality of results, which they opposed, citing natural differences between people and the deleterious effects of attempting to redress them by redistributionist or other means. I agree with the latter proposition, and though I have previously made arguments in favor of "equality of opportunity," I am no longer able to say I know what the term means. Clearly, it begins with formal equality, in the sense that any little boy or girl can grow up to be president. But equally clearly, it does not end there. It has content, too, in the sense that we feel obliged to *create* opportunities for those who are in one way or another disadvantaged. I have described this above as the rebalancing of the desire for freedom and the desire for equality over time, pointing toward an end-state whose content we cannot know but that can be defined formally as "as much freedom as is consistent with equality," where equality is the mutual recognition of freedom.

in support of freedom was subject to practical constraint in the form of Soviet power. But to neoconservatives, the power the United States possessed was not in itself problematic, in the sense of Lord Acton's "power corrupts" or in any other sense, but rather something close to an unmixed blessing.

But what was specifically American about this "exceptionalism"? And how satisfactory, finally, was a satisfaction that stopped at the borders of the political community in question?

As for the Americanness of the exceptionalism, it was clearly rooted in the strong attachment in the United States to liberal democratic principles and the market economy, as well as the ability of the United States to defend those principles against all comers—and, more broadly, to defend the security of the free world. This Americanness stood in contrast not only to the Communist world but also, in certain respects, to the rest of the free world. The perceived deficiencies abroad were various, from socialist economic policies said to have brought on stagnation to the tenuousness of democracy to the very fact that the rest of the free world could not (and perhaps would not try to) defend itself in the absence of the United States. One could say that this exceptionalism pitted an idealized vision of the United States against (sometimes somewhat tendentiously described) realities elsewhere in order to declare reality abroad deficient by comparison.[23] In my view, however, it is not the exceptionalism that is the problem: Properly understood, this exceptionalism is nothing more or less than our universal liberalism. The problem is the identification of this exceptionalism as specifically "American," as if it were somehow confined to the United States. To be sure, the United States has played an important role historically as an exemplar and promoter of this liberalism and occupies the uniquely complicated position of

23. Similarly, Habermas and Derrida have recently created an idealized vision of "Europe" by which to judge the United States wanting. Jürgen Haberman and Jacques Derrida, "Plaidoyer pour un politique extérieure commune," *Liberation* (May 31–June 1, 2003).

liberal superpower (in which the tensions between power, as such, and liberalism emerge most fully, and often painfully[24]). It would also be empty to speak of liberalism as *prior to* its embodiment in states capable of defending themselves against illiberal forces at home or abroad. Nevertheless, when the United States promotes and defends its liberalism as its own, it is also promoting and defending the liberalism of others, of which liberalism in America is a part. Our current liberalism and our future liberal politics are not the sole property of Americans, even if the United States has played and continues to play a special role in their protection and extension. On the contrary, these things in principle belong to everyone—albeit, in actuality, not yet.

Especially from within a privileged political community, it is certainly possible to construct a defense of one's privileges: given a world in which good things are unevenly distributed, it is better to have the greater rather than the lesser share. This becomes an easier defense to make to the extent that one can attribute one's privileges to one's own superior internal arrangements rather than to the willful deprivation of others of some of what is rightly theirs. Moreover, there may well be reasons of force majeure mitigating in favor of such a defense—for example, the other's nuclear arsenal or perhaps its insistence on the destruction of our liberalism and replacement by something else.

But before long, and especially as circumstances change, the satisfaction such a defense provides begins to seem partial in character. This is because it is an illiberal defense of liberalism, a particular defense of something whose constitutive characteristics, the balancing of the fraternal desires for freedom and equality, can only be construed as fulfilled when universal. At a minimum, the universality must be incorporated into the particular defense in the acknowledgment that the defense is only contingently particular. At the same time, one

24. For a compelling description of this tension, see Peter Berkowitz, "Liberalism and Power," in Lindberg, ed., *Beyond Paradise and Power*.

must question the legitimacy of attempts to step outside the liberal community and criticize it *because* it is particular—that is, not universal. What follows from such a critique? Should one abandon liberalism where it is because it is particular? Surely not. Rather, what follows is that one should defend liberalism where it is and seek its extension. This proposition, however, is not a critique of liberalism but rather the essence of our current and future politics in support of liberalism.

There is no liberal standpoint outside liberalism. To be liberal is to have liberal relations with other liberals—mutual recognition of the freedom and equality of each in relation to the other.

In Conclusion

I have tried to show what I take to be the four most important ways in which the intellectual history of neoconservatism served as a precursor or progenitor of the future politics I have derived from liberalism's universal aspiration. The first of these, methodological in character, was the overriding new concern with the relationship between the ideal and the actual. The second was the discovery of the self-perpetuating qualities of liberal economic order, which in turn implies self-perpetuating qualities of the liberal social order that precedes it.[25] The third was the liberal case, in principle, for the universal extension of liberalism beyond its current boundaries. The fourth was the obligation to defend liberalism where it is even though it is not yet universal.

There are many other currents in the intellectual history of neoconservatism. Some of them, I readily grant, do not fit especially well

25. The liberal order is self-perpetuating in that its continuation requires nothing external to itself. But this is not to say that any given liberal order is necessarily permanent. It is subject to its own conservation, which, as I have discussed, entails balancing and rebalancing as necessary the desire for freedom and the desire for equality.

with what I have been describing. Many of these turn on questions of recognition of difference. For example, neoconservatives from the early days were sharply critical of gay rights and affirmative action, among other issues in "identity politics." The neoconservative arguments of the day, in many cases, had a distinctly illiberal cast. But these currents of neoconservatism, even if we find them wanting today, were not entirely out of keeping with what I have been talking about here. The neoconservative case against gay rights, for example, was chiefly based on the supposedly deleterious social consequences that would attend widespread acceptance of homosexuality. Insofar as homosexuality has become more widely accepted and the warned-of deleterious consequences have not come about, one could say that the neoconservative warnings were wrong. One could also say, however, that in subjecting the issue to empirical test, the neoconservative position left open the door to its potential reversal as evidence came in.

There is, then, a further connection between the neoconservative tradition and neoconservatism as the conservation of liberalism, as I have been describing. One could say that the neoconservatives, too, though they might not have put it that way, found themselves engaged in an effort across a variety of subjects to strike a balance between the desire for freedom and the desire for equality. This may have taken the form of seizing on perceived threats to the social order and sounding an alarm. And in some instances, they (I should say "we") may have been wrong about the threat. But in many instances, and arguably the most important, they/we were closer to right.

This, in turn, invites another question about what I have been calling our current and future politics. Where did it come from? I have traced here some influences through neoconservatism, but what else can we say about the *history* of the politics of the future?

In a certain respect, this politics is as old as liberalism itself. I do not mean to suggest that the illiberal opponents of the spread of liberalism were practitioners. However, from the moment that liberals themselves first had the thought that the advance of liberalism was

not unproblematic—that scrupulous attention had to be paid to the reality of the here and now lest liberalism misstrike the balance between the desire for freedom and the desire for equality, and so jeopardize the project of its advance—from that moment on, we have had our politics of the future. In this respect, the neoconservatives were indeed practitioners, and not the first.

Nevertheless, one can hardly say that this politics of the future, the conservation and extension of liberalism, was born conscious of itself as such. That seems to have required a certain real-world progress of liberalism, the balanced expansion of the desire for freedom and the desire for equality, the acceptance of human difference on the basis of the mutual recognition of the freedom of each in the context of the equality of all in their freedom, the diminished sphere of the political in the sense of the resolution of disagreement into agreement to disagree. But by now, we have surely seen enough to know where we are going and—in formal terms at least, namely, the need for balance between the fraternal desires of liberalism, those for freedom and equality—what it will take to get there.