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Jeffrey C. Tuomala
Liberty University, jtuomala@liberty.edu

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Review by: Jeffrey C. Tuomala

BOOK REVIEW

Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*

(The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010).

Justin Vaïsse, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank, begins and ends Neoconservatism: A Biography of a Movement with this warning: "neoconservatism is such a diverse thing that the term has always been close to meaningless." So rather than define it, the author chronicles the diversity of the neoconservative movement. With intellectual and historical antecedents in the 1930s, the movement morphed over three ages from the 1960s to present, each age having a distinct political focus. Vaïsse acclaims neoconservatism for its intellectual contribution over those three ages in successively countering New Left radicalism, winning the Cold War, and launching a war in Iraq.

The book focuses on neoconservatism as an intellectual movement that has interacted with main currents in American political life spanning more than seventy years. Vaïsse amasses detailed historical information about key players, events, organizations, publications, and ideas, presenting it in a very readable though not captivating form. The author's mastery of the subject matter is remarkable given the fact that he as a Frenchman is presumably an outsider to the American political scene.

The biography of the movement begins in the 1930s at the City College of New York where a group of primarily Jewish students with a shared commitment to Trotskyite communism met to discuss and debate the issues of the day. Eventually many of these young intellectuals abandoned the political faith of their youth and became equally ardent anticommunist New-Deal Democrats. During the first age of the movement (the 1960s), these by-then middle-aged intellectuals, established a collective neoconservative identity. The movement formed largely as a reaction to the radicalism of the New Left and the failed social-welfare programs of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Vaïsse identifies the second age of neoconservatism as spanning the 1970s and 80s. Its adherents remained staunchly anticommunist, strong-on-defense, pro-union New Dealers who could just as accurately have been labeled "old liberals," but as compared with the direction the Democratic Party was headed, they were conservative. Two features marked the second age: the neoconservatives' failure to restore the "vital center" of the Democratic Party and their subsequent migration to the Republican Party during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The third age of neoconservatism began in the mid-1990s and continues to the present, but it was during the first term of George W. Bush's presidency that the movement reached the height of its influence. During the third age the movement has focused primarily on the promotion of an interventionist foreign policy. Traditional conservatives in the Republican Party looked with suspicion on these newcomers because of their New-Deal domestic policy preferences, and they found the neoconservative interventionist foreign policy commitments, described by some as "Wilsonianism in boots," to be anathema.

Third age neoconservatism is defined by a foreign policy commitment to democratic globalism. It believes that America has a duty to actively promote democracy and human rights around the world, and, if necessary, to force regime change through military intervention. Neoconservatives claim that America's greatness depends upon its willingness to promote democratic globalism, and they warn that America must not avoid its responsibility, "out of laziness or stinginess," to keep world peace. They are especially contemptuous of the realist perspective on foreign affairs of men like Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell, and George H.W. Bush, a perspective they characterize as "prudent, timid, and cynical," and "not worthy of America."

Neoconservatives reject the accusation that they believe democracy can be exported. What they do believe is that, universally, the human spirit desires freedom, but oppressive regimes crush that spirit. Once oppressive regimes, like that of Saddam Hussein, are removed through the use of military force, democracy "emerges spontaneously" as the "default regime." And because democracies don't attack other democracies (they apparently attack only non-democracies) nations will eventually live in peace.

Although Vaïsse gives much attention to neoconservative policies promoting democracy and human rights, he says very little about its view of the rule of law in foreign relations. Vaïsse claims that neoconservatives look on traditional international law with dismay and writes

Jacobins, old and new, believe that man, being naturally good, is saved by removing his oppressors (through force of arms if necessary) and reordering society, whether domestic or global, through an interventionist state whose jurisdiction is limited only by pragmatic considerations.

that for many, "legitimacy to act derives solely from the American people and from the unique responsibility the United States has for maintaining order." He cites Charles Krauthammer as stating that naïve Democrats and Europeans "believe in paper" (treaties), but neoconservatives "believe in power" as the means to achieve peace.

A very prominent objective of neoconservative foreign policy is an uncompromising defense and support of Israel. Vaïsse notes that in the promotion of that objective neoconservatives have an ally in Christian Zionists, an alliance that he describes as "bizarre," without making any attempt to explain the theological basis for Christian Zionism.

Vaïsse credits neoconservatism with rescuing conservatives from intellectual mediocrity and allowing "Republicans to replace Democrats as the 'party of ideas,'" yet he fails to expressly identify the movement's basic philosophical presuppositions. This is a major weakness in the book. Identification of underlying philosophical presuppositions is a necessary component in an analysis of a movement, especially when that movement is heralded for its intellectualism. Vaïsse's identification of the neoconservatives' policy preferences—and the means, energy, and confidence with which they promote those preferences—is not a satisfactory substitute for an analysis of their fundamental worldview. A rudimentary outline of that worldview is implicit, however, in Vaïsse's description of the movement, but he does not make it express until the end of the book when he attempts to identify the movement's essential unity.

Vaïsse briefly considers, but rejects, suggestions that neoconservatism is essentially a Straussian[1] or Jewish movement. Neoconservatism's essential unity, claims Vaïsse, lies in the fact that it is an "avatar[2] of American messianism . . . that has been present since the country was born . . . ." He invokes that quintessential symbol of America's place in the world—"a city on a hill"—to emphasize his point. Vaïsse then asserts that neoconservatism is a "faith, on the model of French Jacobin nationalism, an off-shoot of the French Revolution of 1789, which was mixed with a universalist credo." In short, neoconservative democratic globalism is essentially French Jacobinism, which in turn, is essentially American messianism.

The French Jacobins were an outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy that placed its faith in autonomous human reason, the natural goodness of man, and civil government devoid of jurisdictional limits. This Enlightenment faith is implicit in Vaïsse's depiction of neoconservatism throughout the book. Jacobins, old and new, believe that man, being naturally good, is saved by removing his oppressors (through force of arms if necessary) and reordering society, whether domestic or global, through an interventionist state whose jurisdiction is limited only by pragmatic considerations. The Jacobin state is messiah, and its salvation comes with much shedding of blood.

Vaïsse could not be more mistaken in equating the messianic vision of French and neoconservative Jacobins with John Winthrop's vision of "a city on a hill." Winthrop used the "city on a hill" imagery in a 1630 sermon that he took from Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14). Winthrop was a Puritan Calvinist, and the city of which he spoke was the Christian commonwealth in which family, Church, and state are acknowledged to be divinely appointed institutions exercising distinct and limited jurisdictional prerogatives under their Messiah, Jesus Christ, whose blood was shed for man's salvation. Winthrop knew that man is not by nature good. His enslavement is primarily to sin, and it is through the gospel ministry of the Church, not interventionist programs and wars of the state, that man can be set free. Personal liberty is a condition precedent to civil liberty and self-government. Similarly, Vaïsse is dead wrong when he perpetuates the myth that the American War for Independence was akin to the French Revolution.

Vaïsse leaves one question unasked that deserves an answer. It appears that most contemporary leaders of neoconservatism were students once and young at elite universities, as were most of their high-ranking fellow travelers in the Bush II administration. Were they, as young men, as eager to fight wars in foreign lands for the advancement of democracy as they have been to send other men's sons, and even daughters, to fight those wars? Perhaps it's the prerogative of graduates of Yale to start wars, but it's the duty of graduates of Central High to fight them. LLJ

NOTES

1 Leo Strauss was a political philosopher who taught at the University of Chicago

2 In Hinduism, thought to be a god that becomes incarnate