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Anti-Freedom Conservatism

by Sheldon Richman

“A prescription drug entitlement is not inherently unconservative, unless the welfare state itself is — and it isn’t.” — George Will

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* back in August, Fred Barnes, executive editor of the neoconservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*, asks, “Is President Bush a conservative?” Barnes replies that, although many conservatives were having doubts, considering the dramatic surge in federal spending and Bush’s acceptance of other manifestations of bloated government, “the case for Mr. Bush’s conservatism is strong.”

Barnes goes on: “But the real gripe is that Mr. Bush isn’t their kind of conventional conservative. Rather, he’s a big government conservative.” To which, Barnes responds, in effect: So? Who says you can’t be a conservative and in favor of big government? Big government conservatives, he said, “simply believe in using what would normally be seen as liberal means — activist government — for conservative ends. And they’re willing to spend more and increase the size of government in the process.”

Barnes has been pushing big-government conservatism for nearly 20 years, starting back when he was an editor at *The New Republic*. So he’s entirely comfortable with George W. Bush in the White House. What more could he ask for? — an expansion of the machinery of the state in behalf of “conservative ends” and a comprehensive “national greatness” war program to boot.

See if you can follow Barnes’s logic. He writes, “The essence of Mr. Bush’s big government conservatism is a trade-off. To gain free-market reforms and expand individual choice, he’s willing to broaden programs and increase spending.” Barnes realizes that this sounds like squaring the circle. So he illustrates. “Thus his aim in proposing to add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare is to reform the entire health-care system for seniors. True, the drug benefit would be the biggest new entitlement in 40 years. But if paired with reforms that lure seniors away from Medicare and into private health insurance, Mr. Bush sees the benefit as an affordable (and very popular) price to pay.” (Barnes is oblivious to the fact that it makes little difference

whether the government runs Medicare directly or indirectly through regulation of insurance companies and managed-care providers.)

Not convinced? Barnes provides another example. “On education, Mr. Bush and [Sen. Edward] Kennedy joined to pass the No Child Left Behind Act. Its only real reform was a mandate for states to test student achievement on the basis of federal standards. Many conservatives, including some on the president’s staff, felt this wasn’t sufficient reform to warrant boosting the federal share of education spending. Still, Mr. Kennedy and other liberals aren’t happy either. They’d expected even more spending.” Got that? Neither did I.

Almost like a proud father, Barnes brags that Bush has all the big-government-conservative characteristics he outlined long ago. First, he’s realistic, meaning he doesn’t bother trying to reduce the size of government, because “people like big government so long as it’s not a huge drag on the economy.” That’s why even before winning the White House, Bush jettisoned the old Republican promise to abolish the Department of Education. “Instead,” Barnes writes, “he’s opted to infuse the department with conservative goals.” (I guess privatizing education isn’t one of those goals.)

Second, Bush is positive. The problem with pushing tax and spending cuts is that it’s so negative. Barnes states, “Mr. Bush has famously defined himself as a compassionate conservative with a positive agenda. Almost by definition, this makes him a big government conservative.”

Third, Bush, like all big-government conservatives, has “a far more benign view of government than traditional conservatives have.” Barnes elaborates:

Big government conservatives are favorably disposed toward what neoconservative Irving Kristol has called a “conservative welfare state.” (Neo-cons tend to be big government conservatives.) This means they support transfer payments that have a neutral or beneficial effect (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid) and oppose those that subsidize bad behavior (welfare). Mr. Bush wants to reform Social Security and Medicare but not shrink either.

It will be news to scores of good analysts to learn that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid have had neutral or beneficial effects. On what planet has Barnes been living?

The godfather of neoconservatism

Let’s turn now to Irving Kristol, since Barnes brought him up. Kristol is widely regarded as the godfather of neoconservatism. Around the time that Barnes’s article appeared, Kristol published one in his son William’s magazine, the same *Weekly Standard* for which Barnes works. The article, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” notes that neoconservatism has a vital mission,

to convert the Republican party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy.

This should dispose of the allegation that only conspiracy theorists can possibly see the neoconservative hand behind Bush's government-boosting programs.

Kristol goes on to point out that neoconservatism

is hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic; and its general tone is cheerful, not grim or dyspeptic. Its 20th-century heroes tend to be TR, FDR, and Ronald Reagan. Such Republican and conservative worthies as Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, and Barry Goldwater are politely overlooked.

This list is peculiar, to say the least. The heroes listed were all activist presidents. (Yes, even Reagan, who also claimed FDR as a hero.) But so was Herbert Hoover, who can accurately be called the true father of the New Deal, and Eisenhower did nothing to roll back the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt's Leviathan. Nevertheless, we get the idea. Claiming the two Roosevelts as mentors speaks volumes.

Kristol notes that it is neo-conservative policies that have produced "popular Republican presidencies." But what does that really say? The American people have been conditioned for years to expect government to give them things that someone else (or no one at all) will have to pay for. Republicans have found a way to do this without *appearing* to be socialists. Is this something to be proud of?

In the policy area, Kristol claims that the neoconservatives have embraced economic growth more boldly than the traditional conservatives. By that he means they, unlike their traditional brethren, have no fear of budget deficits. For Kristol, the option of economic growth through the rollback of government and the radical freeing of economic activity is not on the table.

Neoconservatives, he said, don't like

the concentration of services in the welfare state and are happy to study alternative ways of delivering these services.

Like Barnes, he doesn't understand that coercive government manipulation of ostensibly private organizations differs little from direct socialistic provision. Please don't confuse neocons with libertarians or Hayekians. *The Road to Serfdom* is not one of their texts.

Kristol writes,

Neocons do not feel that kind of alarm or anxiety about the growth of the state in the past century, seeing it as natural, indeed inevitable.

Liberalism — the Spencerian variety — was a “historical eccentricity” and nothing more. “People,” Kristol explains, “have always preferred strong government to weak government.” Here he takes a swipe at what he calls “libertarian conservatives” (a contradiction in terms, I submit). While neocons are allied with traditional conservatives in their concern about the state of the culture, the same cannot be said of “those libertarian conservatives who are conservative in economics but unmindful of the culture.” (In the neocon worldview, to favor freedom in an aspect of life is to be “unmindful” of that aspect.)

Finally, Kristol gets to foreign policy. He begins with the trivial. Neocons believe in patriotism (undefined) and embrace “the ability to distinguish friends from enemies.” They also oppose world government, but that is simply the flip side of their belief in unilateral empire-building. That becomes clear when Kristol asserts,

For a great power, the “national interest” is not a geographical term.... A larger nation has more extensive interests.

Like it or not, the United States is the most powerful nation on earth and

with power come responsibilities, whether sought or not, whether welcome or not. And it is a fact that if you have the kind of power we now have, *either you will find opportunities to use it, or the world will discover them for you.* [Emphasis added.]

It always convenient to find some kind of necessity for what you want to do anyway. Where does President Bush fit into all this for Kristol?

But by one of those accidents historians ponder, our current president and his administration turn out to be quite at home in this new political environment.... As a result, neoconservatism began enjoying a second life, at a time when its obituaries were still being published.

Big government and freedom

So there you have it. Big-government conservatism, or its synonym, neoconservatism, stands for a powerful state in pursuit of “conservative ends.” There are problems, to be sure, with the Barnes-Kristol thesis. What are “conservative ends”? An older school of conservatism (which actually consisted of near-libertarians) would have said that chief among those ends was individual freedom achieved by restraining government power. But if that’s so, it makes no sense

to talk about using government to achieve those ends. They also understood that a government with interests not bound by geography is in fact an empire, not a constitutionally limited republic. Thus, big-government conservatism is either incoherent or a cynical attempt to appropriate a cozy-sounding label.

What about the moral case for self-ownership and against coercion? We never hear this issue raised by the neocons. They sometimes talk about intrusive government. But your meddling neighbor can also be said to be intrusive. The fundamental issue is the initiation of physical force. “Transfers” are, in Bastiat’s words, “legal plunder.” The advocates of big government either don’t recognize that plunder is at the heart of the state. Or they don’t care.

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