The Priestly Rhetoric of Neoconservatism

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The torrid conflicts of the 1960s produced a profound change in American politics. Nowhere was this change more evident than in the clash between radicals and liberals of the New Left, and the emerging “neoconservative” defenders of American culture and politics. Once members of the Old Left, neoconservatives adopted a “priestly voice” to attack contemporary liberalism and radicalism and to promote their political authority. However, this voice, with its tendency toward rational argument, mediational politics, and appeals to tradition, produced rhetorical and ideological difficulties which may plague much political discourse that aspires to social-political transformation and intellectual justification at the same time.

THE TORRID CONFLICTS OF THE 1960s produced a profound change in American politics. Nowhere was this change more evident than in the clash between radicals and liberals of the New Left, and neoconservative defenders of American culture and politics. Once the intellectual vanguard of the Old Left, neoconservatives claimed that liberals and radicals, especially those in the Democratic party, had abandoned true liberalism.1 Neoconservatives such as Berger (1972), Glazer (1971), Huntington (1975), Kristol (1976, 1992), Moynihan (1970, 1973), Podhoretz (1989), and Wilson (1985), were infuriated by what they perceived to be failed government social programs and the pressures placed on government by radical activists. As a consequence of their disillusionment, these Old Left advocates moved increasingly to the Right. A move which, as Podhoretz (1989) explained, was not administered by failed social policies [alone]. We were shaken up [by African-American violence, by student revolts, and] . . . by the anti-Americanism that by the late ’60s had virtually become the religion of the radical movement in which we ourselves had actively participated in the earlier years of the decade. (pp. 56–57)

In order to regain control of the social policy debate, neoconservatives mounted a sustained and serious assault against contemporary liberalism. In the thirty year span this critique took shape, they exerted tremendous political influence, providing intellectual legitimation to the

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conservative war against the liberal state (Dionne, 1991; Dorrien, 1993; Steinfels, 1979). Mostly social scientists, cultural critics, and political analysts, neoconservatives were the first to confront both conservatives and liberals, both intellectuals and members of the public, with a discourse that combined public and intellectual appeals. In this sense, the study of neoconservative discourse is important for two reasons: first, besides commandeering scores of research institutes, law centers, and political journals, their voices have been heard frequently in government forums and in the popular media. Second, of far greater significance for the student of public communication, has been the attempt by neoconservatives to fuse seemingly opposed political philosophies. In so doing, they constructed a discourse that exhibited both elite and popular resonance. The neoconservative mission sought to heal a growing tension between state and culture. This tension, they argued, was inherent in the failed discourse of liberalism. For neoconservatives, a new voice had to be found that would bring the social scientific knowledge of the academy to bear upon real world problems in a manner honoring and celebrating traditional American social practices and beliefs. Broadly put, in opposition to what they saw as the melioristic critique and the elite experimentation of liberals and radicals, neoconservatives fused “priestly” and “bardic” voices.

Toward this end, neoconservatives derived a unique priestly authority from a set of persuasive definitions of classic liberalism and conservatism. Neoconservatives began with the classic liberal respect for social scientific progress, method, and for individual liberty, self-government, and equality of opportunity. To this they added a conservative commitment to the preservation of a stable, prosperous, and tradition-bound society. Hence, neoconservatives hoped to secure from contemporary liberals and traditional conservatives both the moral and the technical high ground. Neoconservatives wished to look as though they had matured beyond what they labeled as naive, opportunistic, and confusing liberal idealism and preachy conservative moralism, to a more scientific, more parsimonious understanding of social affairs. Yet, the alternative they offered, a primarily “priestly” rhetoric (Lessl, 1989), may have had serious consequences for political debate. By emphasizing knowledge, passive reflection, and acquiescence to priestly intellectuals in order to secure rational decision-making or to recapture a sense of the morality of tradition, neoconservatives may also have established one set of authoritative and civil relations at the expense of others. The development of this neoconservative priestly voice and the extent of its impact are only beginning to be assessed by communication scholars.

This paper examines popular books, editorials, and articles of prominent neoconservatives, mainly from the 1960s through the 1980s, on matters related to social policy. Many of these writings appear in popular opinion magazines sponsored by neoconservatives, such as Commentary, but also in more scholarly journals like The Public Interest. A brief
description of the priestly voice is offered. The major priestly characteristics of neoconservative discourse are then investigated. Lastly, the implications of neoconservative rhetoric are explored.

Recent developments in neoconservatism are beyond the confines of this essay. However, Weiler (1987; Dorrien, 1993) has studied a new generation of neoconservatives, such as Newt Gingrich, Jack Kemp, George Gilder, Jude Wanniski, and Lawrence Mead. Weiler (1987) attributes their political successes to a merger of optimistic, populist argument with a revolutionary ethos, along with a theory of capitalist morality. The rhetoric of the original neoconservatives considered in the present essay differs significantly from the appeals of those Weiler (1987) uncovers. Members of this former, older group were as equally public-minded as the later generation of neoconservatives. Yet, they still attempted to provide the intellectual foundation for (neo)conservatism by embracing a more priestly, and a less populist and revolutionary stance. In one sense, conservatives of all stripes owe a great debt to the original neoconservative movement. As one prominent neoconservative, Kristol (1976), has explained, "... conservatism, as it has developed over the past 150 years, has lost its intellectual and spiritual vigor. It need[ed] an infusion of new energies—hence, neoconservatism" (p. 75). In the 1990s, advancing age will probably lead many of the original neoconservatives to retire from public life. Whether those who remain adopt Weiler's (1987) more populist, revolutionary rhetoric, or some other group of politicians takes over as priestly advocates, remains to be seen.

NEOCONSERVATISM AND THE PRIESTLY VOICE

In his essay on the public rhetoric of natural scientists, Lessl (1989) distinguishes between priestly and bardic communication. Priestly discourse is that rhetoric which "crosses the boundaries between a particular elite subculture and the broader social groups within which it is nested" (Lessl, 1989, p. 184). Over the last several decades scientists have employed a "priestly voice" to legitimize a scientific worldview and to discredit "scientific creationism." Rhetoric "which confines itself to the world of common sense experience already integral to its audience’s identity" (Lessl, 1989, p. 184) is bardic. Bardic communication includes "much of what is conventionally regarded as rhetorical" (Lessl, 1989, p. 187), such as television programming, the discourse of popular political officials, and the popular themes transmitted in these popular messages. Although Lessl (1989) separates the bardic from the priestly, he notes that the functions of these two forms historically have often been conjoined within one office. The bardic and the priestly sometimes co-occur in neoconservative discourse as well. This is especially true in the way neoconservatives co-opt popular conservatism’s call to private virtue.
Although Lessl (1989) identifies many qualities of priestly discourse signalling its operation as a socializing agency of institutional culture, three major features are examined. The first quality is a commitment to the specialized languages and methods of the elite, or rationalism. As Lessl (1989) explains, bardic communication, always in some sense about its audience, "is subjected to the judgments only of these auditors. The bard's rhetoric is reflexive; in it we find a culture speaking about itself to itself" (p. 186). Priestly rhetoric, however, is mostly extensive, "the speech of one culture to another" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186). The bard, says Lessl (1989), "reworks established themes, presenting novel redactions of available myths to successive generations of a culture in an effort to integrate new historical developments into a more enduring symbolic framework" (p. 186). Similarly, the priest is an interpreter rather than an inventor but draws in creating a particular kind of discourse from the symbolic resources of the institution the priest represents. The priest speaks on behalf of a specialized subgroup of society, yet bears responsibility for elucidating the application of its esoteric concepts to the broader political situation. Unlike bards, the rhetoric of the priest is "extra-human, always originating within a certain elite substratum of society and represent[ing] a reality that the audience can only superficially hope to approach" (Lessl, 1989, p. 183). Although "the priest mediates between cultures—that of the common individual and that of an elite institution—his world view is decidedly that of the elite" (Lessl, 1989, p. 187).

Herein lies the authority of the priestly voice, especially when priestly scientists speak to the general public. Priestly rhetoric, Lessl (1989) explains, is "largely vertical, descending from above as an epiphanic Word, filled with mystery and empowered with extra-human authority" (p. 185). However, secular priests also bring the "interpretations of established theory and method" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186) to the general community for political or pedagogical reasons. This serves "the rhetorical purposes of the scientific community so long as these popular renderings show a degree of fidelity to scientific orthodoxy" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186). Most crucially, these "specialized technical languages elicit reverence from the ordinary individual that perpetuates their prestige and power" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186).

A second feature of priestly rhetoric is that, unlike their bardic counterparts, priests act as mediators between an institutional group and society at large; they are both a part of and detached from the society they serve, positioned "at the outskirts of their world as ambassadors to the unsaved" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186). According to Lessl (1989), priests must therefore enter into the realm of the public to stand "as mediators between . . . [an] elite and society at large" (p. 186); they must blend theory with practice. Priests "interpret the meanings of a specialized scientific vocabulary but within the bounds of the general culture's semantic repertoire" (Lessl, 1989, pp. 185–86). The role of mediator is a
powerful one, as Lessl notes. Such rhetoric may be motivated by a sincere desire to inform the masses, but the very need to adapt and simplify suggests "the upper hand" (Lessl, 1989, p. 186) that the priestly communicator enjoys during these transactions.

Finally, in the priestly voice, as there is in the bardic, a kind of posturing toward tradition or orthodoxy is witnessed. Clearly, priests, both secular and religious, are defenders or protectors of an orthodox tradition. This defense of tradition takes on a priestly, as opposed to a purely bardic, tone when it is grounded in science. Lessl (1989) points out, for instance, that when authorized by science, arguments founded in tradition enable priestly rhetors to transcend simple individual or group affiliation, to represent something permanent and stable. Priestly rhetoric distances itself from other types of rhetoric by insisting that the "origins of priestly insights reside outside of ordinary human experience as revelations of spirit or nature" (Lessl, 1989, p. 184). As Lessl (1989) puts it, the unique ability to influence the otherwise immutable forces of the social or natural world, through the intervention of (scientifically grounded) tradition, is what gives secular priests "an elite status as well as a formative role in creating a particular society's existential consciousness" (pp. 184–85).

As a gatekeeper positioned at the frontier of a professional world, the priest also seeks out and admits those initiates needed to renew the life of the particular community or tradition which the priest defends. At the same time, the priest is charged with policing those boundaries dividing the world of traditional orthodoxy from any outside challenges. In the political realm, the priest becomes a rhetorical traffic cop who welcomes the approach of the politically faithful while blocking unbelievers from entering "into the avenues of orthodoxy" (Lessl, 1989, pp. 186–87).

Obviously, neoconservatives were not exactly like the public scientists about whom Lessl speaks. Still, neoconservatives have been intellectual elites whose communication was directed downward to the public and sometimes horizontally to other experts. In a very important sense, they were also mediated. This was because neoconservatives claimed to be committed to bringing (their interpretation of) social science to bear on practical problems and on the question of tradition. Other elite political groups have certainly aspired to the priestly rank. But more than any others over the past thirty years, the arguments of neoconservatives have reflected the qualities of priestly rhetoric. Indeed, liberal critic Walzer (as cited in Dorrien, 1993, p. x) acknowledged that neoconservatism has been the only intellectual movement in recent American politics to successfully unite theory and practice. Francis (1991), a conservative critic of neoconservatism, puts this point boldly, stating that neoconservatism has become "the defining core of the 'permissible' right—that is, what a dominant left-liberal cultural and political elite recognizes and accepts as the right boundary of public discourse" (p. 15).
Yet, the way the priestly voice has contributed to such political success becomes an important question.

_Priestly Rationalism_

As social scientists, academics, and cultural critics, neoconservatives considered themselves in possession of certain "truths" authorizing them to speak out on social concerns. They wanted to spread their elite knowledge about social affairs to the general public. Doing so, however, while maintaining the rights and entitlements of priestly advocates. The rational part of the neoconservative priestly voice assisted them, disseminating knowledge in addition to evoking the desirable _ethos_ of the informed, politically-engaged philosopher-king.

Writing in the introduction to the first issue of _The Public Interest_, a neoconservative journal devoted to the social scientific analysis of social affairs, Bell and Kristol (1966) drafted an emerging priestly blueprint for developing social policy in a turbulent world. Neoconservatives possessed priestly authority because they could bring their own social science to bear on political practice, measuring policy against the vital "public interest." Quoting Lippmann (1922) in their essay, the public interest was defined as "'what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently'" (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 5).

Not long afterward, Glazer, a sociologist at Harvard University, promoted a similar priestly approach. Glazer advised neoconservatives to do what they did best as intellectuals, uphold the classic liberal values of "rationality, moderation, balance, [and] tolerance" (cited in Steinfelds, 1979, p. 76), and respect "the enduring need for civility, tolerance, and intellectual rigor" (p. 76).

On one hand, acting "rationally," "benevolently," and in the name of the "public interest," connected neoconservatives with traditional conservatives. Both groups were particularly wary of the fiery, fanatical spirit of revolutionary (Marxist-Leninist) ideology. On the other hand, in a move perhaps designed to captivate intellectuals concerned with the ideological tenor of political debate, neoconservatives generally expressed little interest in the _republica Christiania_ and in the romantic agrarianism of the Old South (Gottfried & Flemming, 1988). These traditions were at the core of much conservative thought. Neoconservatives viewed any deep yearning for these traditions to be just another misguided manifestation of ideology. As nearly "extra-human" members of a specialized, rational culture, Bell and Kristol (1966) promised to hold themselves to a more rigorous, priestly standard: "it is the nature of ideology to _preconceive_ reality; and it is exactly such preconceptions that are the worst hindrances to knowing-what-one-is-talking-about" (p. 4). Neoconservative writing, the authors maintained, "will be animated by a bias against all such prefabrications (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 4)."
As Weiler (1984) points out, during the 1970s another group of disaffected liberals, most notably "neo-liberals" like Gary Hart, Paul Tsongas, Michael Dukakis, and Bill Bradley, also made claims to "anti-ideology" and rational innovation. Although these defections were welcomed by neoconservatives, neo-liberals posed little apparent threat to the authority of neoconservatives. One sign of their priestly superiority was revealed by the fact that neoconservatives were wed more to tradition than to neo-liberal ideals. Another priestly difference between neo-liberals and neoconservatives was offered by Podhoretz (1989), who noticed that, neoconservatism has administered a 'mugging' of its own to its opponents on the left. Thus, instead of calling for bigger ... social programs, [neo]liberals nowadays carry on about investment, economic growth, and competitiveness. ... And instead of promoting drugs ... [and anti-family values], liberals and radicals join in attacking the Republicans for being insufficiently zealous in waging war against the former and insufficiently 'caring' about the latter. (p. 87)

Clearly, neoconservatives had soundly defeated all liberal challengers, forcing neo-liberals to talk more and more like neoconservatives. However, as Podhoretz (1989) recounts their conversion, neo-liberals changed out of political expediency, not philosophical conviction. "The trouble is ... that none of these apparent tributes to the influence of neoconservatism signifies much more than a belated realization that openly belittling America is no way to win elections" (Podhoretz, 1989, p. 57).

Of the two political conversions, neoconservatism was a more genuine, less "belated" type. After all, neoconservatives came to their conversion through a rational "process of reflection and reconsideration that gradually brought us to a new appreciation of the virtues of the American political system and of its economic and social underpinnings" (Podhoretz, 1989, p. 57). Moreover, while neo-liberals were late in their conversion, and overly opportunistic, neoconservatives were "profoundly" affected by an almost spiritual awareness, as if such deeply felt experience signalled an ascent to true political priesthood. "So profoundly affected were we by this new appreciation that we have been devoting ourselves ever since to defending America against the defamations of its critics at home" (Podhoretz, 1989, p. 57). In short, neoconservatives aspired to utilize their rational methods to defend, to preach, and to lead in accordance with the real orthodoxy. Neoconservatives were true believers, "devotees," whereas neo-liberals were depicted as mere technical pretenders to the priestly pulpit.4

Thus far, it has been shown that neoconservatives believed their social science represented a more objective and therefore better approach to social problems. From their allegedly superior priestly perch, neoconservatives usually frowned upon the efforts of liberal policy experts. As Lessl (1989) might say, in order to consolidate their political power, neoconservatives tried to block "the attempts of pseudo-science
[or pseudo social policy-making] to enter into the avenues of orthodoxy” (p. 187). They argued that when liberals tried to translate their sophisticated social theories into practice, they actually complicated matters. So convinced were neoconservatives of the severity of these liberal entanglements that they attempted to eliminate liberal abstractions from public debate altogether. Rhetorically, the imposition of social scientific procedures and judgments worked well, since it allowed neoconservatives to operate with “parsimonious” (Burke, 1969, p. 98) explanations. By talking in terms of social scientific laws, neoconservatives could reduce (or seemingly simplify) social policy debate to a series of fundamental maxims. Neoconservatives did not then require and often disregarded unwieldy liberal interventions, emotional affiliations, and theoretical conceptions. In effect, they could close down debate.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan provides a good example of social scientific laws in action. A trained political scientist, Moynihan has also been one of the few neoconservatives elected to political office. Moynihan has sometimes been called a neo-liberal because of his long-standing affiliation with the Democratic party and because he “has since reverted to his earlier liberalism” (Dorrien, 1993, p. 16). However, Moynihan’s critique of liberal social policy defined neoconservatism’s main domestic concerns from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s.

Why did Moynihan object to contemporary liberalism? During the 1960s, liberals still operated from the assumption that politicians and social planners could analyze social problems rationally and formulate quasi-scientific solutions. But Moynihan turned liberal social science and social policy back in on itself. He drew upon a different interpretation of social science expressed in “the law of unintended consequences, [stated that] in complicated situations efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse, on occasion calamitous” (Nash, 1979, p. 325). Writing about the War on Poverty’s community action approach, a program initiated by liberals in government, Moynihan (1970) applied this law to discredit liberal policy abstractions: “a program was launched that was not understood, and this brought about social losses that need not have occurred” (pp. xii–xiv). Not only did liberal social engineering make intractable social problems worse, but the liberal approach was neither well-understood nor practical: “The government did not know what it was doing. It had a theory. Or, rather, a set of theories. Nothing more” (Moynihan, 1970, pp. 170).

“The law of unintended consequences” [Nash, 1979, p. 325] was utilized by Glazer (1971), too, who tried to discount liberals by pointing out the naivety of, and the emotional excesses in, liberal politics. Liberals, he argued, believe

that for every problem there is a policy, and even if the problem is relatively new, the social system and the political system must be indicted for failing to tackle it earlier. . . . [Liberal] efforts to deal with distress themselves increase distress. (pp. 51–52)
Priestly Rhetoric

Liberals, Glazer (1971) continued, calculate to make us “feel guilty for not having recognized and acted on injustices and deprivations earlier” (p. 51). In this case, invoking the authority of a social scientific law allowed Glazer (1971), *ex cathedra*, to dismiss liberal social policy and underlying liberal intentions: liberal efforts “to deal with distress [invariably] increase distress” (pp. 51–52). Liberals might well have been motivated by true compassion, a desire to rid society of “injustice,” but Glazer insisted that this, too, exacerbated things. For attempts by liberals to place “guilt” onto the “political system” created a kind of moral agonizing that was not productive to objective social policy implementation. In general, whereas liberals tried to expand the possibilities of social policy beyond its means, neoconservatives like Glazer (1971) argued for the “the limits of social policy” (p. 51). These limits could be ascertained where a more careful, objective understanding of social science were employed. In other terms, Glazer (1971) was asserting that neoconservatives were seeking simpler policy alternatives, since they sensed “the limits” of human intervention; they appreciated complexity but desired parsimony.

The objection might agsin be raised that neoconservatives were not very different from neo-liberals. For both groups emphasized rational competence (along with “new ideas,” pro-business policies, and economic growth) as a means of social empowerment. Yet, as Lasch (1991) explains, during the 1970s, when “... liberal support for abortion, affirmative action, and busing had already driven masses of Democrats out of the party, nothing could have been less likely to win them back than this managerial, technocratic, ‘suburban’ school of liberalism” (p. 508).

How did the alternative technocratic rhetoric of neoconservatism, without being completely populist, become more compelling to conservatives and liberals alike? One possibility is suggested by Lessl’s (1989) notion of “claw back.” Claw back occurs when an institution portrays “its particular ethos as the very essence of humanity” (Lessl, 1989, p. 188). A special case of claw back was located in neoconservative rhetoric. This discourse did not completely neglect the bardic component. Rather, neoconservatives validated the popular idea of private virtues through parsimonious social science. They did so by connecting the priestly social scientific world of the political theorist with the bardic realm of traditional conservative ideology and the concerns of ordinary citizens. Neo-liberals, opportunistic or naive technocrats, infrequently broached the sphere of the bardic. As neoconservatives saw it, conservative values were not only useful for regulating human behavior, but represented ideals the public really cherished.

Wilson (1985), for example, derived parsimonious, political conclusions from his review of social scientific research on a variety of social ills, including education, welfare, public finance, and crime. He observed that many “public problems can only be understood—and perhaps
addressed—if they are seen as arising out of a defect in character formation” (Wilson, 1985, p. 3). For him, the key to overcoming these problems was to put social science to useful work by manipulating character formation: “for most social problems that deeply trouble us, the need is to explore, carefully and experimentally, ways of strengthening the formation of character” (Wilson, 1985, p. 16). Such basic manipulations, in the long term, would bring about virtuous action and help recover the public interest. In other words, weighty liberal solutions could be abandoned when policy makers understood the more parsimonious fact that “the public interest depends on private virtue” (Wilson, 1985, p. 16). Wilson (1985) asserted that his attribution of social problems to defects “in character formation” (p. 3) was based upon social science literature. However, his analysis made it clear that conservatism posed the only viable answer when it came to alleviating many social ills.

Hence, for neoconservatives, parsimony became a rhetorical tool for illustrating that all paths in their priestly interpretation of social affairs led to the triumph of conservative values and institutions, just as their bardic counterparts had predicted. In the hands of neoconservatives like Bell and Kristol (1966), Glazer (1971), and Wilson (1985), the more popular predictions of bards carried empirical, social scientific weight, the stamp of the rational priest.

That the purely rationalist guise might be contaminated by ideology seemed not to concern neoconservatives. Mixing popular ideology with rationality, despite the anti-ideology appeal, created a unique blending of priestly theory with practice, and the elite method with public parlance. With this bardic-priestly voice, neoconservatives could attract ordinary individuals looking for informed elites to re-establish traditional moral ties, to uphold the true American orthodoxy. However, neoconservatives could also tempt educated members of the public, people interested in less abstract social theorizing who still desired to ground their political proclamations in something more institutional (i.e., scientific) than intuitions or appeals to tradition (e.g., religion). For some of these observers, the common sense reasoning of the bard could be validated through priestly neoconservative social science.

In practice, neoconservative social thinking may not have functioned all that differently from Republican platforms of the past. Whether neoconservatism actually represented a return to classic liberal thinking is also a question for debate. The rhetorically important point is that these thinkers presented neoconservatism as if it were different, an improved political-intellectual (i.e., priestly) perspective. Neoconservatives depicted politics as endorsing rational action that promoted the social welfare—less action than liberals but more enlightened action than that proposed by traditional conservatives.
Still, in order for neoconservatives to make an impact in the political realm, they needed to do more than merely criticize existing positions. They needed to mediate as well.

Priestly Mediation

If Walzer (1987) is correct about neoconservatives, the way they managed to rhetorically unite theory and practice becomes important. At first glance the neoconservative attempts to take control of the debate over social policy by assuming priestly rationalism appears to have increased the divide between theory and practice, between elites and the public. In fact, neoconservatives were skeptical of the public. As Bell and Kristol (1966) admonished, “a democratic society, with its particular encouragement to individual ambition, private appetite, and personal concerns, has a greater need than any other to keep the idea of the public interest before it” (p. 5). For neoconservatives, the revolt of the 1960s only intensified their fear that the public, lacking rational guidance, would lose sight of the public interest.

Obviously, though, neoconservatives were not ready to give up their purchase on the public, if only because doing so would mean situating themselves completely outside the bounds of acceptable politics. Perhaps this is another reason why neoconservatism kept “the idea of the public interest before it” (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 5). As neoconservatives saw things, effective governance required that certain political elites, “mediators” (Lessl, 1989), articulated the public interest in light of rational investigation. This rhetorical role enabled neoconservatives to maintain a link with the very public they doubted.

For neoconservatives, being mediators meant positioning themselves as political advisors. Bell and Kristol (1966) justified this stance, albeit in a very abstract sense. They asserted that when debating “issues of public policy, [it helps] to know a little better what we are talking about—and preferably in time to make such knowledge effective” (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 3). Clearly, neoconservatives believed they knew a little better than most “what we are talking about” (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 3). Furthermore, they worked for the public in ways the public could not, steering its vital energies away from self-interests toward the betterment of society. Neoconservatives directed rational deliberation “toward the common good rather than to private benefits. It is such a public opinion that The Public Interest seeks to serve” (Bell & Kristol, 1966, p. 5).

Still, in order to sustain whatever public, political attention they attracted, neoconservatives had to do more than mediate in an advisory capacity. They had to convince audiences that neoconservative social policies would make knowledge “effective” in the real world. Such a pragmatic focus, earlier evident in the way neoconservative rhetoric simplified policy debate and accommodated certain bardic themes,
undoubtedly appeased onlookers disillusioned with the abstract social theorizing of liberals. As Burnham (1972) observed, neoconservatives turned from liberalism because they found it "intellectually bankrupt [and] pragmatically sterile" (p. 516). But neoconservatives thought they could make a difference because their social policies would preserve the fragile social order.

The idea of preserving the social order was aimed toward conservative circles and perhaps toward moderate liberals bothered by social unrest and instability. As stabilizers of the social order, neoconservatives described social policy in terms of achieving explicit moral goals. Meanwhile, liberal social policy was pictured as confused, ill-conceived, even immoral insofar as it contributed to the general breakdown of social norms and conduct.

Berger (1972) adopted such a view, arguing that, as a neoconservative, he aspired to solve social problems within existing social and political structures, and do so without the destabilizing policies of contemporary liberalism. As he explained, "... it is very possible to want to preserve the basic status quo of American society as a practical political goal, without necessarily sharing the entire legitimizing apparatus of liberalism that appertains to this society" (Berger, 1972, p. 510).

Huntington (1975) displayed equal concern about diminishing social order. In social scientific terms he described how liberal social programs and radical demands "contributed to a democratic distemper, involving the expansion of governmental activity ... and the reduction of government authority" (Huntington, 1975, p. 102). Huntington painted a landscape of America and its institutions, with all of its democratic vitality sapped by radical/liberal mis-ventures. America was seen as having too great a strain placed on government authority. Ways had to be found to alleviate this strain or else the detrimental consequences to social order "will be felt for years to come" (Huntington, 1975, p. 64).

To summarize, by making themselves look as though they were political mediators, neoconservatives may have appealed to conservatives and to old-style liberals. These were audiences looking for trustworthy elites to intervene in society but not to the extent that social order was disrupted. Unlike liberals of the time, neoconservatives seemed to reflect the great desire for science and stability that was the promise of classic liberalism in its original form. They appeared to be moving toward a solution to the perplexing difficulty of establishing a society that was free and orderly, rational and pragmatic. They tried to create a state of democratic consciousness where priestly mediators replaced mere technocratic managers. As Moynihan (1973) himself described the priestly role of neoconservative social scientists, "Only a very special and dedicated cadre—itself an elite of sorts—can hope to keep the other [liberal] elites ... from tearing the country apart" (p. 269).
Neither the element of rationalism nor the role of mediator provided neoconservatives with a body of knowledge or a general historical framework from which they could draw their substantive political conclusions. For this they required an intellectual or political “orthodoxy” (Lessl, 1989) and a powerful defense of tradition.

The Priestly Defense of Tradition

For neoconservatives, tradition was their orthodoxy, and, as Lessl (1989) reminds us, priests must protect the orthodoxy. As a rhetorical appeal, respect for the past (especially traditional religious institutions and beliefs, social institutions such as the family, and political patriotism) closely linked neoconservatives with conservatives of the day, while distinguishing them from contemporary liberals. Like traditional conservatives, neoconservatives could show that they, too, distrusted liberal efforts to alter time-tested social structures. Neoconservatives worked against radical change by advocating Burke’s (1955) belief in gradual reform. In this sense, neoconservatives again incorporated bardic themes. They assimilated the language and also the redemptive power of tradition, already found in popular conservative rhetoric.

Glazer (1971), for instance, reproduced familiar conservative ideology, arguing that “the breakdown of traditional modes of behavior is the chief cause of our social problems” (p. 54). In order to revitalize order and to produce continuity in American life, Glazer (1971) recommended “hesitation in the development of social policies that sanction the abandonment of traditional practices” (p. 54). Additionally, he suggested caution when it came to “the creation and building of new traditions” (Glazer, 1971, p. 54). In a similar manner, Podhoretz (1989) claimed that traditional values were “not only more conducive to personal health and happiness than any [liberal/radical] alternative ‘life styles’ but also the indispensable foundation of a stable and prosperous society” (p. 57).

However, neoconservatives were also drawing upon the tradition of liberal-democratic modernity. Unlike traditional conservatives, neoconservatives were not necessarily nostalgic for some idyllic, pre-modern past. They believed in many progressive notions introduced from modernity, such as equality of opportunity, religious toleration (although not always religious themselves), the “high” culture of Western art, material and moral progress, and the modern faith in science and reason. These classic liberal ideals had only to be applied to the present situation.

Updating classic liberal virtues in a manner that combined bardic and priestly voices is what Kristol (1976) seemed to have in mind. Surveying the host of social difficulties confronting the nation in the 1970s, he explained that contemporary liberalism did not respond well to constantly changing social exigencies: “There can be no permanency of
success to any... enterprise... Sooner or later, dissatisfaction sets in, and then the choice is between 'making all things new' and a neoconservatism which tries to breathe new life into old forms” (Kristol, 1976, p. 74). Traditional conservatism did not fare much better, as Kristol (1976) acknowledged: “Institutions and values, whether it be in religion or politics, are never created by orthodoxy-conservatism” (p. 74).

Neoconservatism, however, offered a reasonable alternative. This was because, as Kristol (1976) mused, neoconservatives were more mature and knowledgeable than either liberals or conservatives. Indeed, once liberals themselves, neoconservatives “were originally moved to ‘make things new’” (p. 74), something which only intensified social instability. But in Kristol’s (1976) account, neoconservatives eventually realized that the past had something to teach as well. So they sought out “new energies... by returning to the sources... [seeking] to recover the living trunk beneath all those brittle branches” (Kristol, 1976, p. 74). Neoconservatives apparently learned to seize the progressive liberal impulse, employing social science and “adapting new institutions and values to the real world” (Kristol, 1976, p. 74). Then, this impulse was moderated by the conservative drive to make institutions and values “work by reconciling them with prevailing habits of mind and customary behavior” (Kristol, 1976, p. 75).

In this description, Kristol (1976) suggested that neoconservatism could address both potential rivals and allies. As classic liberals, neoconservatives rationally “adapted” to “the real world” without enfeebling or liquidating traditional structures. As new conservatives, they “breath[ed] new life into old [traditional] forms” (Kristol, 1976, pp. 74–75).

Of course, some rivals, mostly radical and liberal intellectuals in the academy, were beyond the reach of neoconservatism. Like their more popular, conservative counterparts, neoconservatives had complained that these intellectuals were less interested in innovating and adapting than they were in revolutionizing social policy. The neoconservative protest was of considerable rhetorical importance. This protest separated neoconservative priests from their profane, liberal, and radical opponents. Priests may innovate through social science (something traditional conservatives did not), within the confines of accepted tradition. Priests, however, were not considered revolutionaries.

The revolutionary teachings of liberal/radical intellectuals had, according to neoconservatives, infiltrated social practices as a whole, with terrible effect, fostering everything from hedonism to the breakup of the nuclear family. The neoconservative defense of tradition rested upon rational argument and appeals to tradition. Nevertheless, the more popular (i.e., highly ideological) appeal of scapegoating was also striking. This appeal allowed neoconservatives to mirror popular conservative lore that liberals and radicals were out to destroy society.
As recently as 1992, for instance, the American Enterprise Institute, a neoconservative think tank in Washington D.C., published a particularly shrill paper by Kristol which reflected views neoconservatives have held for three decades. Kristol (1992) worried about academic and intellectual circles, where liberal and radical intellectuals, followers of the "Nazi sympathizer, Martin Heidegger" (p. 17), had degraded cultural traditions. These scapegoats for America's educational and cultural ills had preached "moral relativism" (Kristol, 1992, p. 16) for so long that they were "subverting the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Kristol, 1992, p. 17). The devastating result was that all of the nation's other deep traditions, and "in the end . . . Western civilization itself" (Kristol, 1992, pp. 16–17), was threatened. Kristol (1992) reached into tradition to offer as a priestly panacea "the moral code traditionally provided by religion" (p. 16). His was a secure, comfortable world of "traditional moral certainties" (p. 17).

**IMPLICATIONS OF NEOCONSERVATIVE RHETORIC**

The implications of neoconservative priestly rhetoric can be probed by considering its distant historical analogue in the popular social criticism of the 19th century British economist, Malthus. He argued for a sphere of moral restraint, where public problems gave way to private sensibility and rational investigation, where imprudent social policy only multiplied the bearers of misery and the agents of vice. Like the society envisioned by Malthus, neoconservatives tried to appeal to various groups, particularly intellectual social reformers, by appearing not to overtax the government or the public's resources, and by urging rational intervention (Walzer, 1987). Yet, the key to this comparison is that Malthusianism was enthusiastically embraced by 19th century political elites because it served their private interests, while obscuring the plight of the needy. The more contemporary priestly version counseled citizens and political officials, those who considered themselves "compassionate" and those who did not, to feel no guilt for refusing to manipulate the social order, even when injustices abounded. As neoconservative rhetoric defined it, concerted public (or governmental) action was unnecessary, since properly instilled moral virtues would help make intractable problems less troubling.

In fact, the special language of the priestly voice, in this instance, social science, may have oversimplified political debate by formulating understanding of social affairs in a facile way, in a manner which encouraged an exclusionary notion of political community. For neoconservative rhetoric further diminished perceptions of the severity of social problems. The often chaotic, unpleasant experience of the downtrodden was circumvented by the more orderly causal laws and language that quantified (and recontextualized) their plight in sanitized, uncomplicated terms, far removed from the affairs of concerned citizens. As Brown (1989) has observed, in the reductive language of social science,
"the terms of the thing-world of cause and effect do not allow us to know or even name what these actions mean" (p. 34).

True, because of its "intermediary" role, along with its bardic component, neoconservative rhetoric portrayed its users as social scientific benefactors of the public interest, but also as providers of continuity with great American traditions. Neoconservatives therefore looked as though they were an integral part of the very public they wished to rule. Nonetheless, this public embodiment through the roles of mediator and bard was dubious. As McKerrow (1989) points out, the ruling class maintains its hegemony by "clearly articulating its motives for support in terms of the people" (p. 95). Most neoconservatives did not reject all government solutions. However, neoconservative rhetoric, like Malthusianism, supplied the intellectual palliative to a great many individuals, both within and outside of government, who believed that it was in the best "interest" of "the people" to curtail if not abandon much government social programming. This may be why Dionne (1991) has lamented that, by the 1990s, neoconservatives "simply legitimized doing nothing at all" (p. 75).

The effects on social policy aside, another implication of priestly political discourse is that the scapegoating and the authoritarian tone in such rhetoric can blind rhetors to the tensions within their own arguments. Neoconservatives claimed to be uniquely engaged in both theory and practice, academic and political forums. Yet, their prominent and frequently caustic assertions about liberal hegemony and the corruption of the university denied the same speaking privilege to liberal/radical foes. Apparently enamored by their technical pronouncements, neoconservatives did not consider that the ideological shortcomings they attributed to liberal social engineering might also afflict their versions of "experimenting" with "virtue," or of public argument in general. Neoconservatives were not fundamentally anti-democratic. However, by defining themselves as priestly guardians and as mediators, and by describing their foes as unfit for social policy-making (as corruptors of the public interest), neoconservatives authorized themselves as the definitive masters of public policy and of public tastes.

Alas, perhaps the most serious implication of neoconservative priestly rhetoric is that it attempted to displace an ideal of social justice, without ever negotiating in a public forum what this ideal might actually be. Farrell (1993) has warned that losing sight of such ideals would mean a culture where idealistic rhetoric plays a reduced if not wholly insignificant role. This is precisely what neoconservatives appeared to have in mind. Social ills were only to be comprehended through a political-social scientific screen which fused conservatism's emphasis on personal responsibility, with the scientific penchant for parsimony of explanation. As Burke (1969) suggests, the parsimonious explanations of social science can significantly restrict "the scope of our motivational terminology" (p. 98), so that only certain basic conclusions come to dominate our
focus. In neoconservative rhetoric, the result of parsimony was that social problems were viewed simplistically, as controllable defects in "private character" that could be "experimented" with. Furthermore, the causes of social problems were linked to any number of exaggerated liberal/radical sources. An ideal of social justice, and the specific (liberal) social programs geared to obtain it, were pictured as too idealistic or complex, beyond the realm of rational possibilities, and therefore "limited" in significance. Such parsimonious rhetoric made it difficult to construe social difficulties in alternative ways, namely, as the intricate symptoms of historical neglect, mass consumerism, or as the objects of concerted and imaginative public action that may still lie within our reach.

ENDNOTES

1. The original neoconservatives were largely a generational cohort. Most of them were born around the 1920's; some of them were socialists, a large number Jewish. The formative historical reality that shaped their political thought, especially the moral impulse that came to underlie their later work, was the rise of totalitarianism and the failure of socialism. While eventually abandoning Marxist philosophy, they remained interested in quantitative analyses of political events in terms of long-run socioeconomic shifts. This tendency they carried with them into the 1940s, supporting Roosevelt's New Deal, and later into the 1960s and 1970s, the decades during which their conversion to conservatism began in earnest.

2. Although they are not considered in the present work, neoconservatives such as Joseph Epstein, Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus, William Bennett, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Seymour Martin Lipset have all delivered provocative critiques of American politics and culture. Neither are the foreign policy views of neoconservatives examined, although, during the 1970's and 1980's, events in foreign policy pushed them even farther to the right (see Ehrman, 1995; and the neoconservative journal for foreign affairs, The National Interest). Adamantly opposed to the Cold War idealism and the liberal social policy of presidential candidate George McGovern in 1972, they moved toward Richard Nixon, but distrusted the latter's policy of detente. Later, believing they were betrayed by the Carter Administration's allegedly soft stance against communism, they rushed to the side of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Not only were neoconservatives attracted to Reagan's foreign policy views, they adopted and later designed many of his social policies as well, all the while remaining suspicious of Reagan's populist brand of conservatism. Reagan was not himself a neoconservative. The relationship between Reagan and the neoconservatives was more a marriage of political convenience. As Dorrien (1993) put it, their "ideological stridency perfectly suited the new president during the early years of his presidency" (p. 10). As for the neoconservatives themselves, they undoubtedly saw in the Reagan administration a vehicle for influencing politics at the presidential level. Dionne (1991) argues that neoconservatives embraced Reaganism precisely because, by the 1980s, their own ideological views had become more conservative: like Reagan, "neoconservatives became increasingly skeptical of government" (p. 69). By Reagan's second term emerging political differences alienated them from traditional conservatives both within and outside of the Reagan administration, to the point where neoconservatives were granted few important posts in the subsequent Bush administration. For analyses of the sometimes difficult and complex relationship between neoconservatives and traditional or "paleoconservatives," see Barnes (1992), Gottfried & Flemming (1988), Himmelfarb (1988), Kondracke (1991), Starr (1989), Tonsor (1986), and Van Den Haag (1989).

3. Among recent conservative contenders to political power, Murray's (1984) controversial text, Losing Ground, best exemplifies priestly rhetoric. Sometimes called a social policy
conservative by political observers (Dorrien, 1993), Murray’s (1984) anti-liberal tirade is considered even more conservative than the original neoconservative writings. Nevertheless, Losing Ground uses a large array of quantitative social science data and appeals to tradition to indict liberal social policies and, ultimately, to recommend the dissolution of them. This priestly form has no doubt made Murray (1984) a very attractive ally for neoconservatives like Podhoretz, who in the 1980s published many of Murray’s articles in Commentary.

4. As Weiler (1984) rightly points out, even in economics, neoconservatives were unlike neo-liberals. Neoconservatives argued that “new capitalism” was largely divorced from notions of social equity. Also, while both neoconservatives and neo-liberals believed in economic innovation and its promise of returning prosperity, neoconservatives largely gave up the historical liberal association with the interests of the workers. Neo-liberals “share with neo-Conservatives, though not perhaps to the same extent, an admiration for the competitive vitality of the new capitalists, and for their success” (Weiler, 1984, pp. 374–73).

5. Like conservatives in general, neoconservatives distrusted direct democracy (the “mob”), yet defended the principles and practices of liberal democracy, not necessarily because they saw them as means for the betterment of society, but because they believed democracy required a bastion against what would otherwise become (the liberals’) foolishness and (the radicals’) anarchy. Tonsor (1986), attempting to distinguish popular, traditional, or paleoconservatism from neoconservatism, has suggested a more specific delineation: “conservatism has its roots in a much older tradition. Its world view is Roman or Anglo-Catholic; its political philosophy, Aristotelian and Thomist; its concerns, moral and ethical; its culture, that of Christian humanism” (pp. 54–56). Neoconservatives, meanwhile, belong more to the tradition of what Himmelfarb (1988) calls “liberal-democratic modernity, the tradition of Montesquieu, Madison, and Tocqueville” (p. 56). Traditional conservatives are the heirs to the Christian and aristocratic Middle Ages, to Augustine, Aquinas, and Hooker. According to Himmelfarb (1988), “The principles of neoconservatism are individual liberty, self-government, and equality of opportunity; those of paleoconservatism are religious—particularly Christian—belief, hierarchy, and prescription” (p. 56). In the rhetoric of neoconservatism, however, these differences are more a matter of degree than kind, insofar as neoconservatives argue for both classic-liberal virtues, and the necessity of religious institutions (a few of them, like Berger (1972), are Christian) and ethical-moral foundations.

6. This position is sometimes referred to by neoconservatives as the “new class” argument. See Bruce-Briggs (1979) and Lasch (1991).

7. As some critics (see Habermas, 1989) have pointed out, this defense of tradition led neoconservatives into an apparent paradox. On one hand, as classic liberals, neoconservatives warmly embraced modern economic innovation and even the free market theory of most conservatives. On the other hand, as tradition-bound conservatives, they decried the evils of cultural modernization which stemmed directly from this innovation, favoring instead the (ostensibly) sturdy moral structures of the past. Perhaps the priestly voice enabled neoconservatives to work around this paradox and to retain the vital appeals to classic liberalism and to traditional conservatism simultaneously. Like Lessl’s (1989) priests, neoconservatives reserved the right to read all cultural developments in terms of the orthodoxy, in this case, in terms of the history of capitalism as they defined it. Cultural corruption was not a natural (or excessive) consequence of un-restrained capitalism. Rather, once capitalism was divorced from religion and other long-standing moral traditions, all essential parts of the orthodoxy, cultural decline became inevitable. As Kristol (1992) himself explained,

The bourgeois capitalist revolution of the eighteenth century was successful precisely because it did incorporate the older Judeo-Christian moral tradition into its basically secular, rationalist outlook. But it erred in cutting this moral tradition away from the religious context that nourished it. (p. 16)
8. The reference to Malthus is owed to professor Ronald Lee, who, in personal conversation, suggested it as a way of capturing one of the major ideological characteristics of neoconservative discourse.

REFERENCES


