The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America’s Politics

by Peter Steinfels

(Simon & Schuster; 335 pp.; $11.95)

Peter L. Berger

This is, as far as I know, the first systematic book-length treatment of an ideological grouping that has emerged in America in recent years and has been gaining influence intellectually as well as politically. Most visibly centered around two periodicals, The Public Interest and Commentary, the group includes individuals with divergent views on many issues. In this, of course, it is no different from other ideological formations in this country. Still, the term “neoconservative” has stuck, has been (albeit grudgingly) accepted by most of the people so designated, and is roughly apposite: The neoconservatives are generally located to the right of the liberal people as they “radicalized” others. The same could certainly be said of Stein- fels’s evident struggle to keep his violent antipathies in check. His failure to do so seriously flaws a book that would otherwise have been an important contribution to political discourse. As it is, it will predictably infuriate most of the individuals it deals with and thus harden the lines between the camps rather than foster conversation across these lines. Despite all this, the reader who is not directly involved in this internecine warfare among American intellectuals will find here a good deal of information from which to draw his own conclusions. Steinfels deals both with the history and the present positions of the neoconser- vatives. He traces the antecedents of neoconservatism to the early struggles between pro- and anti-Stalinists in the American Left, to the cold war, and (most important) to the convulsions of the 1960’s that “conservatized” some people as they “radicalized” others. The present positions of the neoconservatives are quite accurately summarized: There is a crisis of legitimacy in Western societies in general and in America in particular; this crisis has cultural more than socio-economic roots; it is a profound “failure of nerve,” for which intellectuals in the “adversary culture” (a term coined by Lionel Trilling) are largely responsible; in domestic politics there has been an excess of government interventions that has increased rather than diminished social tensions, and has in consequence contributed to the crisis of legitimacy; on the international scene the same “failure of nerve” has led to appeasement in the face of Soviet imperialism and of the antidemocratic forces on the rise in the Third World. Both domestically and internationally, they believe, a new radical egalitarianism serves to undermine both the stability and the self-confidence of Western societies. The domestic recipes of the neoconservatives tend toward lowered expectations from government, while abroad the tendency is to support a harder line toward Communist and Third World regimes. Culturally, the neoconservatives are inclined to affirm traditional bourgeois values (such as merit and family stability), and therefore to react negatively to the challenges to these values made by the counterculture and various “liberationist” move- ments.

Steinfels devotes entire chapters to the views of three people: Irving Kristol, Moynihan, and Daniel Bell. Others (such as Norman Podhoretz and Robert Nisbet) are discussed at length in different places. It would be impossible within the space of this review to examine the fairness of Steinfels’s treatment of these people (in my opinion it is spot- ty and in some instances the ad hominem observations are painful). It is probably more interesting to ask why Steinfels distances himself from the neoconservative positions, given that he is representative of a broad segment of the American intelligentsia.

In Steinfels’s view of America there is also, to be sure, a crisis of legitimacy, but it is a deserved one to a considerable extent. The crisis has cultural aspects (and on some of these Steinfels sympathizes with the neoconservatives), but its roots are in the socio-economic and political realm—in the misdeeds of corporate capitalism, in the unjust distribution of the good things in life, and in the foreign adventures of the United States. As to the intellectuals of the “adversary culture,” both their oppositional atti- tudes and their power have been much exaggerated. While some government

“...at issue is one’s over- all perspective on American society.” 

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Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness
by Marshall Frady
(Little, Brown; xi + 546 pp.; $12.95)

Billy Graham: Evangelist to the World
by John Pollock
(Harper & Row; x + 324 pp.; $10.00)

Tracy Early

Frady had better walk cautiously. Though Graham himself prefers to shower critics with buckets of warm syrup, some fiercer disciples may discover the love of Christ impelling them to boil Frady's head in a washtub. But he has written a useful book, the first attempt by a writer with stature outside the religion camp to give Graham the full treatment.

Also useful, in a quite different way of course, is the work of Graham's official biographer, John Pollock, a Church of England minister. In Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography he took the story up to 1966, and then updated it in 1969. Now, in Billy Graham: Evangelist to the World, he covers the past decade. Pollock provides not only data but also the tint of lens for viewing Graham as Graham would wish, especially in scenes dealing with his relationship with Nixon. But for analysis, Frady's the one. By showing himself greatly enthused, Frady got several hours with Graham plus interviews with family and associates. They are likely not pleased by his interpretations of Graham as one who happily took the kingdoms of this world and obligingly served the devil.

Himself the son of a Southern Baptist preacher, Frady feels the awkwardness. Many Baptists will anathematize him, he knows, as a scalawag who smiled his way in for dinner and then dirtied on the rug. So he sprays a magnolia scent around: "The difficulty is that, when one arrives at the point where one has to begin the actual writing of it, one necessarily must withdraw...." And so on, which won't pacify them a whit.

The rest of us, however, can feel grateful for the book, though it turned out to be less than it might have. Frady overwrites with a purplish passion, never stopping at one superfluous adjective when the dictionary will yield four others as silvering, shimmerous, scintillant, and sockdolagizing. He also detours rather much, delivering the deep things of Calvinism, his tracings of American culture, and other fancy goods. Though all that may come chockablock with import, the reader will skip over patches of it. More pertinent are the pages showing Graham's connections with the American power structure in the cold war years, and how he won the backing of big men who did not necessarily share his piety or his views on fornication.

The lineup of important figures in Graham's career makes a sobering spectrum—from conservative to ultraconservative to wacky. One starts with his forward-walk as a high school junior under the exhorting of the anti-Semitic tub-thumper Mordecai Ham. Then, via Bob Jones, a Florida Bible institute, and Wheaton, on to anointment by the dying warhorse William Bell Riley. Next to Hearst, whose 1949 order to "puff Graham" put him in orbit—like Nixon, from Southern California. Later, he accumulated plutocrats such as Sid Richardson, politicians such as Strom Thurmond, and panjandrums such as Henry Luce. L. Nelson Bell, pure Goldwater, became not only Graham's father-in-law but also an influential advisor.

And there are some that Frady skips. He bypasses Graham's decision to identify with the First Baptist Church of Dallas and its ranting pastor, W.A. Criswell—a notable decision because Graham had no personal or organizational reason for putting his membership in a Texas church except to show...