

Fukuyama's Second Thoughts

Francis Fukuyama

**America at the Crossroads:
Democracy, Power and the
Neo-Conservative Legacy**

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Reviewed by Jonah Goldberg

When Samuel P. Huntington, author of the famous “clash of civilizations” thesis, was accused of being too simplistic, he pled guilty as charged. But, he countered, any serious attempt to explain complex phenomena—never mind the grand sweep of world history—would have to be simplistic. “When people think seriously,” he said, “they think abstractly; they conjure up simplified pictures of reality called concepts, theories, models, paradigms. Without such intellectual constructs, there is, William James said, only ‘a bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion.’”

Since the end of the cold war, no one has made a greater name for himself—save for Huntington himself—in sorting out the confusion than Francis Fukuyama. In his famous *National Interest* essay, “The End of History?” (and in the subsequent book *The End of History and the Last Man*), Fukuyama offered the first Big Explanation of Everything after the Berlin Wall fell. Breathing new life into Hegel—and by extension Marx—Fukuyama argued that history is purposive, and that over time the world must move in the direction of modernity and democracy, because modernity and democracy are the systems best equipped to satisfy the diverse longings of mankind. Fukuyama has deflected some subsequent criticism by arguing that he was not prescribing a blueprint for hastening the end of history, but rather saying that his thesis was misunderstood by conservative “Leninists” seeking to accelerate history by imposing

democratic norms on less advanced societies. *The End of History* was about modernization and materialism, he insisted, not democracy and idealism. “What is initially universal,” he now writes, “is not the desire for liberal democracy but rather the desire to live in a modern society, with its technology, high standards of living, health care, and access to the wider world.”

This is somewhat understandable, considering how unkind the post-9/11 world has been to his original thesis. The rise of Islamism was hardly sudden, but America’s realization of the scope of its challenge was. In *The End of History*, the Islamist threat was at most an opponent to liberalism, not a competitor, since Islamism, according to Fukuyama, could not offer an ideological challenge to liberal democracy (an odd dismissal, by the way, if idealism doesn’t matter).

The September 11, 2001, attacks seemed to refute his thesis, however, and validate Huntington’s. The latter argued that history was far from its end, but that global conflicts would continue so long as the world was divided into greater “civilizations” such as the West and Islam. After 9/11, this darker vision seemed to sort out the new reality better than did Fukuyama’s faith that all the great arguments had been settled. According to Huntington, culture matters

more than prosperity, and culture by definition involves the bad and the good sides of human nature. “It is human to hate,” wrote Huntington. “For self-definition and motivation, people need enemies.”

In his new book, *America at the Crossroads*, Fukuyama now undertakes not an analysis of the world so much as an effort of self-redefinition—and indeed, he does so by finding his own new enemies. This requires some difficult juggling, since he does not actually seem to disagree with them all that much.

Fukuyama argues that neo-conservatism, the school of thought with which he has been most closely associated, needs to be saved from “the neocons,” by which he means the younger generation of foreign policy hawks and democratic idealists—people like William Kristol, Robert Kagan, and Paul Wolfowitz—who generally go by that label, as well as others who get called “neocons” whether they like it or not. According to Fukuyama, these neocons internalized the wrong lessons from the cold war and are now applying them to today’s world, in effect becoming right-wing Leninists dedicated to speeding up the wheel of history the way they did in hastening the demise of the Soviet Union. While the original neo-conservatives

were defined by their skepticism of utopian projects, he argues, the new generation concluded from the West's victory in the cold war that sweeping social engineering can in fact work. To support his point, he quotes Hoover Institution fellow Ken Jowitt: "The Bush administration has concluded that Fukuyama's historical timetable is too *laissez-faire* and not nearly attentive enough to the levers of historical change. History, the Bush administration has concluded, needs deliberate organization, leadership, and direction. In this irony of ironies, the Bush administration's identification of regime change as critical to its anti-terrorist policy and integral to its desire for a democratic capitalist world has led to an active 'Leninist' foreign policy in place of Fukuyama's passive 'Marxist' social teleology." To which Fukuyama adds: "I did not like the original version of Leninism and was skeptical when the Bush administration turned Leninist."

In order to make this case, Fukuyama rehearses the origins of the neo-conservatives, including their relationship with the political philosopher Leo Strauss. And on this score, Fukuyama should be congratulated for offering one of the most thoughtful treatments of the subject in recent years. Indeed, the twin serums of "Straussianism" and "neo-conservatism" have generated more

concentrated middle-brow stupidity than virtually any other subject in recent memory. And, when served in the poisoned chalice of anti-Bush polemic, these already heady brews form a grog so toxic that even recreational use usually ends in a kind of drooling paranoid dementia. Fukuyama correctly notes that most everything written in recent years about neo-conservatism "is factually wrong, animated by ill will, and a deliberate distortion of the record of both the Bush administration and its supporters."

The story of the original neo-conservatives started with a handful of young, mostly Jewish, Trotskyist intellectuals who gathered in a U-shaped stall called Alcove 1 at New York's City University in the 1930s: Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Lipset, and a handful of others formed in opposition to the much larger conclave of Moscow-loyal Stalinists in Alcove 2 (whose membership included Julius Rosenberg). The rift between Stalinists and Trotskyists intensified until it was finally punctuated by an ice pick in Trotsky's skull in 1940. Over time, as one could only expect given the spectacular moral and economic failure of communism, the ranks of disillusioned intellectuals swelled. In the 1970s, the combined hangover from the 1960s, the Vietnam war, and the increasing tendency toward

accommodation and appeasement of the Soviets shook loose even more former liberals and leftists, chief among them Norman Podhoretz but also many non-Jewish intellectuals such as William Bennett, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard John Neuhaus, James Q. Wilson, Glenn Loury, and Michael Novak.

Contrary to those who believe that neo-conservatism is first and foremost a foreign policy doctrine best summarized as Zionist warmongering, most of these intellectuals were more likely to stand opposed to the domestic folly of campus radicalism and Great Society overreach as they were to communist aggression. Fukuyama rightly identifies this as a crucial point. "If there is a single overarching theme to the domestic social policy critiques carried out by those who wrote for *The Public Interest*," he writes, "it is the limits of social engineering. Ambitious efforts to seek social justice, these writers argued, often left societies worse off than before because they either required massive state intervention that disrupted organic social relations... or else produced unanticipated consequences." This, writes Fukuyama, is what linked the first wave of neo-conservatives to the later converts in the 1960s and 1970s: "Both American liberals and Soviet communists sought worthy ends but undermined themselves by

failing to recognize the limits of political voluntarism."

In other words, neo-conservatism was never fully an "-ism." These were heterodox intellectuals making arguments that often contradicted those of other card-carrying neocons. Nonetheless, Fukuyama identifies four basic unifying ideas or principles fundamental to neo-conservatism: First, the aforementioned folly of sweeping social engineering; second, the belief that America is a force for good in the world, possibly uniquely so, and thus American moral instincts should not be constantly second-guessed; third, that international institutions cannot be reflexively trusted to protect American interests or substituted for American action; and fourth, that the internal nature of regimes has a bearing on their moral stature, which in turn should inform how America treats them. This last point was neo-conservatism's rejection of Nixonian realism.

In Fukuyama's telling, neo-conservatism arose as a *cultural* reaction, first against Stalinism and later against domestic radicalism. The answer to the question "Who are your enemies?" in the 1970s was probably a far better determinant of whether you were a neo-conservative than the answer to "What do you believe?" This continued to be the case when

the second generation of neocons emerged—those who had never migrated from Left to Right but had instead grown up within the movement. They received important staff-level positions in the Reagan administration and served as some of the most effective shock troops for Reagan's foreign and domestic policies.

These younger conservatives, however, fell prey to their own success. "During much of the cold war," Fukuyama writes, "neo-conservatives became used to being a small, despised minority.... The foreign policy establishment—the people who ran the bureaucracies at the State Department, the intelligence community, and the Pentagon, as well as the legions of advisers, think-tank specialists, and academics—was largely dismissive of them. Neo-conservatives were also used to having the Europeans look down on them as moralistic naïfs, reckless cowboys, or worse." But, he continues, "the sudden collapse of communism vindicated many of these ideas and made them appear mainstream and obvious after 1989. This naturally did a great deal to bolster the self-confidence of those who had held them, a self-confidence that strongly reinforced the us-versus-them solidarity that characterizes all groups of like-minded people."

In short, Fukuyama is saying, the neocons got cocky. Their explanation

for the most important conflict of the previous half-century—the cold war—had been vindicated. And, as far as they were concerned, they were best suited to explain the post-cold-war confusion as well.

So the great irony is this: In Fukuyama's telling, the new neo-conservatism of Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan emerges as in many respects the opposite of the old neo-conservatism of Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. This younger generation, which never went through a disillusionment-migration cycle from Left to Right, simply never internalized the lessons of being deeply wrong about something truly important.

In the 1990s *The Weekly Standard* embodied the new attitude. Its editorials rattled sabers at China and Iraq. It aggressively supported military intervention in the Balkans. And, with David Brooks taking the lead, it championed something called "National Greatness" conservatism, which turned the skepticism of the previous generation on its head; the connection to foreign policy was made clear in that the patron saint of National Greatness, according to Brooks, was Teddy Roosevelt. As Fukuyama notes, "National Greatness inevitably manifests itself through foreign policy, since foreign policy is always a public matter and involves issues of life and death." If the old neo-conservatism

was defined by skepticism and trepidation, Fukuyama argues, the new neo-conservatism flirted with hubris on a grand scale.

Whatever its faults—and there are many—this explanation provides far more analytical heft than the run-of-the-mill nonsense we so often hear about warmongers and Straussian cultists. Vice President Cheney was never a neocon. Nor was Donald Rumsfeld, or most of the senior war planners. But they were most certainly battle-scarred veterans of the Reagan years and subscribers to what Rich Lowry, editor of *National Review*, has called the “Reagan synthesis.” Reagan’s success had many fathers and by no stretch of the imagination were they all neocons, but with the aid of a media and academic establishment always eager to discredit traditional conservatism, the storyline that the humane and intellectual facets of Reaganism were “neo-conservative” stuck. Indeed, prior to 9/11 it was standard practice in academic writing to label all remotely legitimate conservative ideas “neo-conservative” rather than simply “conservative,” because the latter had long since been spoiled as a synonym for the racist, sexist, and vaguely fascist.

In this sense, Fukuyama’s criticism of the neo-conservatives is broader than he allows. If the folks at *The Weekly Standard* were guilty

of hubris, so were those at *National Review*. While Fukuyama claims to be debunking much of the “nonsense” about neo-conservatism as an elite Zionist cowboy cabal, he is to a certain extent reinforcing it by treating neo-conservatives as a more distinct and unified group than is really the case. In other words, he is still saying it was the neocons’ fault—just not for the wacky and sometimes anti-Semitic reasons we’ve heard from the paranoid, ignorant, and hysterical.

The failures of Fukuyama’s analysis, however, extend beyond taxonomy. Much has been made of Fukuyama’s alleged hypocrisy in attacking a school of thought of which he was, until recently, an important adherent. He signed the various letters and petitions of the Project for the New American Century. He wrote op-eds affirming the “irrefutable logic” of Bush’s Axis of Evil doctrine and he supported invading Iraq until very late in the game. Former kindred spirits such as Charles Krauthammer have accused Fukuyama of being a fair-weather supporter of the war who only repudiated the effort when public opinion turned against it.

On this score, Krauthammer and others have a strong case. But this has overshadowed an even more important point: If Fukuyama’s

supposedly more authentic neo-conservatism could not spot the folly in the new National Greatness “neo-conservatism” until very recently, the differences between the two outlooks cannot be *that* significant. Even if Fukuyama’s criticisms are entirely in good faith and his critics are completely wrong, the fact that he walked out of the movie just minutes before the credits started to roll—and that he does not admit to any kind of real revolution in his thinking—suggests that we are talking differences in degree, not in kind. This is reflected in most of the discussion about his book, as even supporters of the administration’s policies tend to find his proposals sensible. “Neither his old arguments nor his new ones,” writes a sympathetic Paul Berman, “offer much insight into this, the most important problem of all—the problem of murderous ideologies and how to combat them.”

Indeed, Fukuyama’s specific criticisms suggest that he has come up with his theory first and then selected the facts necessary to support it—precisely the criticism he levels at the Bush administration. He berates Vice President Cheney and his clique for ignoring contrary voices. But Fukuyama himself agreed that those contrary voices were wrong regarding the intelligence on Iraq’s weapons

programs. More importantly, he claims that the war planners’ arrogance led them to ignore warnings about the war’s aftermath. But with the possible exception of General Shinseki’s admonition about the need for more troops to occupy Iraq, such warnings were almost nonexistent—and were certainly not forthcoming from Fukuyama. Indeed, as Lowry and others have argued, the real intelligence failure wasn’t the much-ballyhooed weapons of mass destruction foul-up, but the failure of the CIA and other intelligence agencies to appreciate the extent of Iraq’s social decay. Critics of the invasion essentially made the same mistake that advocates of it made in assuming that Iraq was a functioning nation, and some critics, after the fact, have gone so far as to claim that Iraq has been made even less functional by U.S. intervention. The reality was that it was, to use Kanan Makiya’s phrase, a Republic of Fear. When the United States removed the fear, the whole place imploded. But, again, this does not mean that what happened was widely foreseen: The doom-and-gloom forecasts from bureaucratic opponents of the war were, in the final analysis, at least as wrong as the “cakewalk” talk on the other side—for example, what happened to the refugee crisis the invasion was supposed to create?

Fukuyama criticizes the *Standard* for downplaying the importance of civil society and culture to rebuilding Iraq, which is fair to a point. But he also notes that “*The Weekly Standard* has turned against Donald Rumsfeld and called for his resignation, its chief criticism of him remains his failure to provide enough troops to secure Iraq, rather than the multiple other dimensions of nation-building where U.S. policy fell short.” But is it really true that the *Standard’s* editors would oppose the “multiple other dimensions of nation-building” if Iraq were secure? On the contrary: They call for Rumsfeld to be replaced by Senator John McCain, a bold Rooseveltian type who would, in their view, “make the Pentagon a full partner in the building of a stable, self-governing Iraq and... re-engage the American people in the importance of the pursuit.” Those who advocate more troops do so with the sensible assumption that a pacified Iraq would allow the conditions in which building everything from courts to soccer fields becomes possible.

Fukuyama writes that the new neo-conservatives learned the wrong lessons from the cold war and are hence determined to use military might in circumstances ill-suited to force. “No one was opposed in principle to the use of soft power,” he writes, “they

simply hadn’t thought about it very much. As the saying goes, when your only tool is a hammer, all problems look like nails.”

But Fukuyama has this exactly backwards. The United States has a lot of tools, the military being only one of many. He claims that America “has become steadily less generous” and says that the U.S. ranks 21st out of 22 leading developed nations in foreign giving. But as John Fonte has pointed out, on this count Fukuyama is simply wrong. The U.S. ranks 11th of 22 among leading donor countries, and government foreign aid has doubled between 2000 and 2004, increasing as a percentage of gross national income as well. President Bush committed America to massive increases in spending on AIDS, for example, and has dedicated funds to a host of soft-power measures. In reality, the nations that have only a single tool in their belts are our “allies” in the “international community.” With the exception of Great Britain, the European nations have virtually no ability to project military power abroad, and combined with their tendency to be seduced and corrupted by the talky-talk of the UN and EU and intimidated by large and restive Muslim minorities, it’s no wonder that every problem they see looks like a job for diplomacy.

Fukuyama is director of the International Development Program at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, and something of an international academic celebrity. Perhaps thanks to this experience he is better suited to make sensible suggestions about how to use the levers of diplomacy and aid instead of the hammer of military might. But his calls for a new era of “horizontal accountability” and an “agenda of multiple multilateralisms” seem to suggest that he has become deeply ensconced in the world of transnational elites endlessly talking about talking in places like Davos and Geneva.

Fukuyama is certainly correct that political and intellectual movements cannot be separated from their historical and geographic contexts. Each age makes what it will of the confusion that is the world. And it should be no surprise that what seems to explain things pretty well

in one moment will fail to do so in the next. But Francis Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History*, is a man constitutionally determined to find the permanent theory of everything. It seems, however, that *America at the Crossroads* represents less a serious theoretical exegesis than a momentary crisis of confidence by one of the smartest observers around. It is a snapshot taken at a moment of maximum neo-conservative despair stemming from confusion over the Iraq war and the nature of the Islamist threat. In a Huntington age, he is unwilling to relinquish the vision of a Fukuyama world. As such, this book offers useful insights into the internal contradictions within and among conservative policymakers, but ultimately it creates more bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion than it dispels.

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