
Preaching to the Choir

Norman Podhoretz

**World War IV: The Long Struggle
Against Islamofascism**

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Reviewed by Benjamin Kerstein

Norman Podhoretz, to his credit, is still an angry man. One of the founding fathers of neo-conservatism, Podhoretz has been at the center of American public debate for the better part of five decades, first as one of the “New York intellectuals” who helped midwife the New Left in the 1950s and 1960s, and then as one of its most outspoken critics. He has, in other words, reached the point in his career at which most men would be satisfied to rest on their laurels. His new book, however, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*, is anything but satisfied. A passionate defense of neo-conservatism, the war on terror, and the Bush Doctrine, it is clearly the work of a man under attack, and thus

compelled to vigorously defend both himself and his beliefs.

There is no doubt that neo-conservatism is experiencing a moment of crisis. The Iraq war, for which the neo-conservatives, fairly or unfairly, have shouldered most of the credit and blame, has turned their very name into an epithet in many circles. They have been accused by their critics of everything from warmongering and racism to practically controlling the world. Mainstream opinion in liberal—and some conservative—circles considers neo-conservatism both a misguided and destructive ideology and a spent political force.

The dominant narrative proposed by neo-conservatism’s detractors is one of tragic downfall. The neo-conservatives—so the story goes—rode the turmoil of 9/11 to the heights of political power and influence. In the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war, their ideas became the basis of a major shift in American foreign policy. Then hubris took over. Convinced that their doctrine of democratization

through military power could change the face of the Middle East, the neo-conservatives rushed into an unnecessary war with Iraq, using duplicitous and often dishonest methods to do so. The results, claim the critics, were a disaster for the United States and for the world as a whole.

Perhaps inevitably, therefore, Podhoretz's book is mostly a brief for the defense, an impassioned polemic that reasserts the essential principles of neo-conservatism and attempts to overturn this narrative of defeat and disillusion. In this, it is at least partially successful. But the intensity of Podhoretz's conviction and the ferocity with which he expresses it will likely satisfy only those who have already been convinced. Ironically, Podhoretz's own prodigious talents for tendentious debate and his stark moral convictions make his book both a triumph of polemic and quite unpersuasive.

Podhoretz begins *World War IV* with a counternarrative not only of the war on terror but of the entire twentieth century. He posits, in effect, a series of four global conflicts stretching from the trenches of World War I to the fall of the Twin Towers and into Iraq. The old wars with the old totalitarianism, he asserts, have become a new war with a new

totalitarianism, i.e., radical Islam, or, as Podhoretz and others somewhat controversially refer to it, Islamofascism:

World War III began in 1947 and ended in 1989, having been fought and won by us under the highly imprecise name of the Cold War. From this it follows that the right name for the war that, as we shall see, was already being waged against us long before 9/11/2001, but that we only recognized as such in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, is World War IV.

The continuity of these wars, according to Podhoretz, is based on a simple dichotomy: freedom versus tyranny. By linking World War II directly to the Cold War and the war on terror—World War I seems largely irrelevant to his analysis, probably because few people alive today even remember what the Kaiser stood for—Podhoretz is proposing a twentieth century whose meaning is the struggle, and the eventual victory, of the forces of good over evil.

The objective of the Islamofascists is not merely... to murder as many of us as possible. Like the Nazis and the communists before them, they are dedicated to the destruction of the freedoms we cherish and for which America stands. It is these, then, that... we in our turn, no less than

the “greatest generation” of the 1940s and its spiritual progeny of the 1950s and after, have a responsibility to uphold and are privileged to defend.

He approvingly quotes—twice—the famous lines from President Bush’s address to Congress nine days after the 9/11 attacks: “We have seen their kind before. They’re the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century”—the ideologies, in other words, that the United States confronted in World War II and the Cold War. The president then went on to draw an explicit parallel between al-Qaida on the one hand, and fascism and Nazism on the other. The importance of this speech to Podhoretz’s thesis cannot be underestimated. Indeed, much of his book is taken up by a long and impassioned defense of Bush and the Bush Doctrine against its critics both on the left and on the right.

The most effective part of the book is Podhoretz’s critique of American complacency and inaction during the decades preceding the 9/11 attacks, during which terrorism was dealt with as a legal and criminal problem, not as a military threat. There is very little to argue with here, and while all of these points have been made numerous times, the story of why and how America slept is too important not to be reiterated. As Podhoretz recalls:

The America of those far-off days before 9/11 was a country in which politicians and the general public alike were still unable and/or unwilling to believe that terrorism might actually represent a genuine threat. Attention was of course paid by the professionals within the federal government and in various law enforcement agencies whose job it was to keep their eyes open for possible terrorist attacks on American soil. Yet not even they could imagine that anything as big as 9/11 might be in the offing, and when the few lonely exceptions were not being stymied... the initiatives they tried to take were invariably killed off by the bureaucratic bungling and inertia.

As Podhoretz points out, this complacency—which seems inexplicable in hindsight—was the result of conscious policies. They appeared, at the time, to be eminently reasonable and nuanced but were, in fact, utterly misguided and ineffective.

Podhoretz presents us with a sobering list of such disasters: The murder of United States diplomats by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1970s. The Iranian hostage crisis bungled by the Carter administration’s incompetence. The slaughter of 241 United States Marines by Hezbollah in 1983. The kidnapping and murder of the CIA’s Beirut station chief by the same organization. The *Achille Lauro*

hijacking, Pan Am 103, the first attack on the World Trade Center, the Khobar Towers bombing, the U.S.S Cole, etc. Podhoretz reminds us that American bodies, American lives, American assets, and American prestige were attacked and sometimes destroyed with little or no serious response.

The book places all of this within a specific historical paradigm, one which will not surprise anyone familiar with neo-conservative thought: “Munich.” That is, the policy of appeasement toward Hitler and Nazi Germany which led to the Munich Conference, “peace in our time,” and ultimately to the second of Podhoretz’s four world wars. Noting Osama Bin Laden’s remark that the United States is a “paper tiger,” Podhoretz makes this comparison explicit:

Bin Laden was not the first enemy of a democratic regime to have been emboldened by such impressions. In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler was convinced both by the failure of the British to arm themselves against the threat he posed and by the policy of appeasement they adopted towards him that they were decadent and would never fight no matter how many countries he invaded.

Podhoretz then extends the Munich paradigm further, to include the cold war:

Encouraged by the rapid demobilization of the United States, which to him meant that we were unprepared and unwilling to resist him with military force, Stalin broke the pledges he had made at Yalta to hold free elections in the countries of Eastern Europe he had occupied at the end of the war. Instead, he consolidated his hold over these countries....

Having equated pre-9/11 American policy with Munich and Yalta, the two great blunders of the struggle against twentieth-century totalitarianism, Podhoretz seeks to draw a counter-parallel between the Bush Doctrine, which declared the war on terror, and the Truman Doctrine, which announced America’s intention to resist the spread of communism. Podhoretz believes that the Bush Doctrine marks the end of the era of ineffectiveness. “Designed to confront a new totalitarian menace,” the Bush Doctrine is an epoch-making shift in American foreign policy, not only beginning the war on terror but also justifying it with “an entirely unapologetic assertion of the need for and the possibility of moral judgment in the realm of world affairs, and a correlative determination to foster ‘the spread of democracy in the Middle East.’”

It is this final objective which has proven to be the most controversial aspect of the Bush Doctrine, as well

as the aspect closest, it seems, to Podhoretz's heart. Indeed, much of *World War IV* is taken up with a furious, Zola-esque indictment of democratization's critics, along with critics of the war on terror and the Bush Doctrine in general.

Podhoretz's first target, as should be expected, is what he calls "the old flag-burning left." The Vietnam syndrome, says Podhoretz—i.e., the belief that American power is always a force for ill in the world and doomed to failure—was not eradicated by 9/11, as some had predicted it would be. On the contrary, it has become in many ways stronger than ever, as the old anti-war movement and its ideological brethren have captured the high ground of American cultural and intellectual opinion. Podhoretz points to such figures as Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Noam Chomsky, as well as such luminaries of the European left as Dario Fo and the late Jean Baudrillard, all of whom have been celebrated in the media and in academic circles for their radicalism. These, he tells us, are the avatars of a prevailing culture of anti-Americanism.

This phenomenon, claims Podhoretz, extends beyond the realms of culture and academy into the American media, whose tendentious

reporting of the war on terror and the ongoing insurgency in Iraq consciously reflects the prevailing intellectual zeitgeist.

The Vietnam syndrome was still alive and well. But equally apparent was that the reporters and editors to whom it was a veritable religion understood very clearly that success in Iraq *could* deal the Vietnam syndrome a mortal blow. Little wonder, then, that they so resolutely tried to ignore any and all signs of progress—or, when that became impossible, that they dismissed them....

Podhoretz continues in this vein for several chapters, confronting, in quick succession: isolationists, who believe America should not project its power abroad; liberal internationalists, who favor deference to the United Nations and other international institutions as opposed to unilateral action; and foreign policy realists, who see international relations as a Machiavellian balance of power. All of these groups, Podhoretz claims, are opposed to the Iraq war because victory there would both vindicate the Bush Doctrine and deal a mortal blow to their world-encompassing theories.

Podhoretz is somewhat gentler with the likes of the late William F. Buckley and the respected columnist George Will, both of whom may be somewhat insulated from his wrath by their status as conservative luminaries.

Nonetheless, Podhoretz decisively rejects Buckley and Will's claim that the very idea of democratizing the Middle East is fundamentally "unconservative."

I would... argue in more general terms that, from an indigenously American point of view, there was nothing in the least unconservative about the "ideological certitudes" and the universalism of the Bush Doctrine. For one thing, they followed closely in the tradition formed by the declared aims of the presidents who led us into the three world wars.... The most obvious example was Woodrow Wilson, who promised to "make the world safe for democracy" by sending Americans to fight in World War I.

Podhoretz points to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy as heirs to the Wilsonian tradition—activists for the expansion of freedom beyond America's borders. To this list, he tentatively adds Ronald Reagan and Abraham Lincoln, whose famous statement that "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it" is cited with approval and acclaim.

World War IV ends on an ambivalent note, however, which is oddly out of sync with the defiant tone of the rest of the book. Sobered, perhaps by the legion of opponents he has just finished describing and denouncing,

or perhaps by his acknowledgment of their political power and cultural influence, Podhoretz admits that America's successful response to past challenges is no guarantee of future victory. And the stakes, of course, are immense. "America alone," as Podhoretz puts it, is now charged with saving the West from political barbarism. And he is not at all sure we "have it in us" to win.

Norman Podhoretz's most striking trait has always been his boldness. He has never been afraid of saying that which others would dilute or simply leave unspoken. This sometimes reckless but always fascinating bravado has produced some of his most influential writing. The basic assertion of *World War IV*—that the twentieth century was defined by a Manichaeian conflict between tyranny and freedom—is no exception. Few figures in American intellectual life today are willing to so transgress the spirit of our times as to present an essentially moral reading of history.

There is no doubt that this reading has a certain appeal to it, not least because it grasps what many commentators on the twentieth century do not, namely the immense importance of ideas to modern conflicts. Winston Churchill, in one of his most prescient statements, said that "the empires of the future are the

empires of the mind,” a sentiment with which Podhoretz surely sympathizes. Indeed, he sees the world as a zero-sum game between the ideologies of freedom and the ideologies of murder, a struggle between good ideas and evil ideas.

This is not, however, necessarily for the best. If Podhoretz has an Achilles’ heel, it is rhetorical overkill. It makes for bracing argument, but also a very difficult read. His polemics sometimes become repetitive and overwrought, and his rhetoric predictable and thus easily passed over. Nor does Podhoretz’s aggressive style of debate lend much aid to his assertions. This is particularly apparent regarding his claim that the Vietnam syndrome has led the media to deliberately undermine the war in Iraq—and the war on terror in general—because the media establishment is afraid that military success will disprove its anti-war ideology. Put generously, this is a highly dubious claim. There is a case to be made that there is a prevailing political culture in American (and certainly European) media circles, and that it is strongly left of center and opposed to the Bush administration. But whether this translates into a *deliberate* attempt on the media’s part to falsify the situation in Iraq is highly questionable and impossible to prove. Podhoretz attempts to do precisely that by offering us a survey

in which the negative stories from Iraq far outnumber the positive ones, something which proves nothing but itself. There are innumerable reasons why there are more negative than positive stories coming out of Iraq, not the least of which being that there is a war going on there, and most of the things that happen in a war are, by definition, extremely negative. That Podhoretz sees nearly everything as a product of ideology can lead to insightful observations. But it can also blind him to more prosaic and more likely explanations.

Unfortunately, Podhoretz extends this style of argument to include nearly all intellectual critics of the war, claiming that their opposition is driven by their fear of the Bush Doctrine’s success. There is, one imagines, a far simpler explanation, namely, that those who are critical of the Bush Doctrine are not afraid that it will work, but are convinced that it will *not* work. Certainly, this conviction may be ideologically motivated and may very well be wrong; but Podhoretz’s insistence on putting the cart before the horse, thus attributing sinister motives to his opponents, is unconvincing.

His broadside against his conservative critics Buckley and Will, however, is an entirely different matter and reveals a great deal more about Podhoretz and the crisis of

neo-conservatism than it does about conservative opposition to the Bush Doctrine. What the argument comes down to—and this has always been a stumbling block for neo-conservatism—is the dissonance surrounding the definition of “conservatism.” If conservatism means acting in accordance with a set of cultural values that have accumulated over time, then Podhoretz is certainly correct when he says there is “nothing unconservative” about the Bush Doctrine. If, on the other hand, conservatism means a healthy skepticism toward the capacities of political power, government action, and the basic goodness of humanity—and this is surely the definition Buckley and Will are getting at—then Podhoretz is just as certainly wrong. There is no doubt that the Wilsonian tradition Podhoretz espouses is deeply ingrained in the American psyche. But there is nothing conservative about it. Wilson was not a conservative, and neither were his ideological heirs, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and John F. Kennedy. They were activist liberals in an age when this was not seen as a vice of any kind. In Ronald Reagan, we have a more complicated figure, but one can easily make the case that his policies were driven more by his—quite admirable—opposition to communism than by a Wilsonian belief in universal democracy.

Regarding Lincoln, we are dealing with a figure who lived in utterly different historical circumstances and was speaking in the context of a domestic dilemma, i.e., slavery, and not the question of America’s capacity to spread its way of life abroad, let alone impose it through military force.

Nonetheless, Podhoretz has a point. A deep-seated hatred of tyranny, both domestic and foreign, runs through American culture from its origins to the present day. Americans are and always have been primarily individualists, and they do not like abuses of power, whether by their government or by others. Podhoretz is wrong when he tries to paint the Bush Doctrine in the colors of conservatism, but he is not wrong when he asserts that it is one with a long tradition of American opposition to tyranny. The truth is that Podhoretz and the neoconservatives in general are not nearly as neo, or as conservative, as they sometimes like to pretend.

There is no doubt, however, where Podhoretz’s personal loyalties lie, and it is much to the detriment of his book. Indeed, his unstinting faith in the Bush presidency represents the weakest aspect of *World War IV*. Podhoretz’s defense of Bush—that he is pragmatically reacting to events in the context of an overall strategy—is not a bad

one. Given recent developments, however, it is not particularly convincing. The Bush administration has, over the last few years, effectively ceded Gaza to Hamas, all but abandoned the threat of military force against Iran, turned Fatah into an acknowledged ally, and hung the beleaguered Lebanese democracy movement out to dry. All of these policies may be prudent or acceptable according to various schools of international relations, but they are in direct contradiction to the principles of the Bush Doctrine. Podhoretz justifies his strange faith in the current administration by comparing it to that of Reagan, whose various compromises with the Soviet Union were seen, at the time, as a sellout of his previously furious anti-communism. In retrospect, Podhoretz claims, these policies “deserved to be regarded as prudential tactics within an overall strategy.” This may well be true, but Reagan never compromised his opposition to communism by, for instance, forming an alliance with Castro, as Bush has now done with Fatah.

Podhoretz may be at least subconsciously aware of this, and there is an air of pessimism and desperation to *World War IV* that seems out of sync with neo-conservatism’s usually optimistic tone. Perhaps Podhoretz, despite his insistence otherwise, feels the ground slipping away from him. “Today,” he says, “the forces promoting

defeatism are more powerful than they ever were in the past.” He then quotes Amir Taheri’s comment that America “has become home to a veritable industry of defeat,” a fact which, given the recent spate of Hollywood films on the war on terror, can hardly be denied.

Nor is it a coincidence that, just as he is reaching the end of his book, Podhoretz recalls that during the Cold War

leading anti-Communists like Whitaker Chambers and James Burnham were sure that we lacked the stomach, the heart, the will, and the wit to stand effectively against the true believers of the Soviet Union and its allies and sympathizers: to Chambers we were “the losing side,” and to Burnham we were virtually suicidal in our liberal weakness and folly.

Podhoretz seeks to reassure us by pointing out that “they turned out to be wrong.” This is true, of course—but not entirely so. It is fairer to say that they were both right and wrong. There were certainly moments—the post-Vietnam era most prominent among them—when America did indeed lose its resolve, and spent considerable time finding it again. The very presence of a book such as *World War IV*, i.e., the need for a comprehensive defense of the very *idea* of a war on terror, indicates that we may well be entering just such a moment.

Podhoretz is probably correct in his final assessment that the Bush Doctrine will survive its critics, mainly because he is also correct when he places it firmly within a long tradition of activist foreign policy on the part of the United States. The fact that it is demonstrably not a conservative tradition may lead to division and recrimination within the conservative movement, not to mention a crisis of political identity among the neo-conservatives themselves. But it also means that the general principles on which it stands are widely held and politically sound. Indeed, they are hardly limited to neo-conservatism, and were it not for the vicious influence of partisanship—of which Podhoretz himself is hardly innocent—they would likely find allies even

among the Bush Doctrine's ostensible detractors.

World War IV itself, however, is unlikely to gain much sympathy or support from those outside the neo-conservative consensus. If anything, it will likely alienate and perhaps enrage the undecided, who may well find themselves sympathetic to some of Podhoretz's many targets. In employing a shotgun technique of argument, Podhoretz cuts down not only enemies but also potential allies. He is a brilliant preacher, but even the best preachers sometimes find themselves, by virtue of their own fervency, preaching only to the choir.

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