INTRODUCTION

The Pre-9/11 Years

Did we keep alive a certain way of looking at American foreign policy at a time when it was pretty unpopular? Yes. I think probably you need to have people do that so that you have something to come back to.

Robert Kagan, 2005

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, neoconservatism became the “cause célèbre of international politics.” The ideology of neoconservatism was, it seemed, the intellectual justification for the Bush administration’s new “war on terror.” A number of influential neocons served in, or as advisors to, the Bush administration, and it became apparent that these neoconservatives had lobbied for many of the policies now being pursued under the aegis of a “war on terror” several years before the 2001 terrorist attacks that catalyzed them. As Robert Kagan observes in the quotation prefacing this introduction, neoconservatism had provided “something to come back to.”

The neoconservative foreign policy project had already matured by the time of the 9/11 attacks, and the attention it began to receive shortly before the 2003 Iraq War was belated. In a September 2000 report by the neocon lobby group the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which was signed by five members of the future Bush administration, the authors observed that their vision for unassailable military supremacy was so ambitious that implementing it might prove difficult “absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.” This unwittingly prescient comment indicated that should such circumstances come to pass, these neoconservatives knew how they could be exploited to further long-standing objectives. Yet, during the Clinton years, neoconservatism had matured with remarkably little attention. Although it was always a public—albeit very elite—enterprise (what lobbying efforts are not public?), for the most part it had been absent from public debate since the Reagan years,
when an earlier generation of Cold War neoconservatives had served in government after constructing a critique of détente and putting forward a strategy of aggressive containment. After the collapse of Soviet communism, this earlier generation of Cold War neocons lost its defining purpose (at least in terms of foreign policy). Their strategy had been defensive: premised on the existence of a competing superpower, which they regarded as an existential threat. When that threat disintegrated, they generally began to advocate a much-reduced global role for America.5

However, in the early nineties a second generation of younger post–Cold War neoconservatives emerged. This generation of neocons advocated dramatically different solutions. They posited that the world was no longer bipolar or even multipolar; it was “unipolar.” According to neoconservative columnist, Charles Krauthammer, the United States was now the “single pole of world power” and there was “no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival the United States.” America, Krauthammer claimed, was “unchallenged.” Now free from the constraints of superpower rivalry, the United States could be “a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses” (emphases added). Krauthammer was setting the bar high: he believed that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States had unprecedented freedom of action; suffice it to say that this was a serious overestimation of American power in many ways. Nevertheless, it was “unipolarity” that became the new strategic touchstone. For the neoconservatives, such apparently unprecedented freedom of action was something worth preserving; thus they argued that the United States’ new global strategy should not be defensive, as it had been during the Cold War, but offensive: to actively preserve America’s position as the single pole of world power. Krauthammer’s “unipolar moment” should be extended as far into the future as possible.6 This book will argue that, during the nineties, the chief objective of neoconservative foreign policy advocates was no longer to contain communism, nor to “export” democracy overseas but to ensure that the United States remained the single pole of power in every region of the world.7 Unipolarism thus constituted the new defining strategic and ideological touchstone for neoconservatism in the post–Cold War period—and, indeed, the two terms, “neoconservatism” and “unipolarism,” would become almost (although not completely, as we shall see) synonymous.

During the Clinton years, while they were “in opposition,” as it were, a network led by neoconservative intellectuals, journalists, academics, and political activists debated what preserving the unipolar moment actually meant in practice. Remaining the single pole of power was the goal but how could this be achieved? How should areas of core national interest be approached? Did conflicts in peripheral regions affect the U.S. position?