The United States Supreme: The Invasion of Iraq

The US decision to invade Iraq was the result of the congruence in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks between the neoconservative movement that provided the second tier of decision-makers, the Bush administration, and the central hawkish conservative players in the cabinet, especially Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney. The chief consideration was maintaining US prestige as a strong international leader.

This is not to suggest that the invasion of Iraq was the result of a conspiracy perpetuated by neoconservatives. This view is manifestly wrong, for several reasons. Neoconservatives never controlled the principal functions in the administration: the most senior neoconservative figure was Paul Wolfowitz, the number two at the Pentagon. Before September 11, the neoconservatives did not meet with any success in promoting their agenda of regime change in Iraq, and, moreover, the formula that they advocated, which was seizing control of an enclave in Southern Iraq and developing there the forces of the Iraqi opposition, was not adopted. The administration also rejected the neoconservative candidate to succeed Saddam, the Iraq National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi. Finally, suspecting, based on his campaign declaration in favor of a “humble foreign policy” and his reliance on Condoleezza Rice, a known protégé of Brent Scowcroft, that Bush was going to follow the same realist precepts in foreign policy as his father did, the neoconservatives had openly backed as president his Republican counter-candidate John McCain. Hence, there is little substantial evidence attesting to a neoconservative takeover of the Bush administration.

Yet, neoconservatives played a significant part in the invasion of Iraq, not directly, but through their ability to provide a ready-made intellectual framework justifying Saddam’s elimination from
power. The administration simply subscribed to this view, while disagreeing on tactics such as the enclave plan, nation-building, or the imposition of a Chalabi government. In this sense, the relation between neoconservatives and the Bush administration might be seen as an alliance determined by common concerns over prestige, in which the neoconservatives played the role of the junior partner. Thus, regime change was the product of the eventual triumph, not of the neoconservatives themselves, but of their view of the world, which was especially emphatic on the need to castigate challengers so as to reaffirm US prestige. Therefore, it becomes significant to address how and why the neoconservative views emerged, developed, and ultimately came to define US foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11.

**The Neoconservative Call for Greatness**

For the neoconservatives, prestige constituted the raison d'être of the reinvented movement in the late 1990s. According to neoconservatives, US dominance is supported by two fundamental pillars: “military supremacy” and “moral confidence.” But while the US already controlled the most powerful military in the world, so it was just a question of preserving this lead relative to would-be competitors, “moral confidence,” however, was in short supply in Clinton’s “tepid times.” The result of this alleged absence of vision was that “the 1990s were a squandered decade... The United States held a position unmatched since Rome... The great promise of the post–Cold War era, however, began to dim almost immediately.” Thus, the peril came principally from the erosion of the US dominant rank as a consequence of “the declining military strength, flagging will and confusion about our role in the world.”

Accordingly, for neoconservatives, the United States, under the first president Bush and particularly under Clinton, had exhibited a dangerous lack of will in playing its assigned part as the dominant power by tolerating the political survival of Saddam and Milošević, by reducing instead of increasing defense expenditures, by engaging instead of containing dictators, and by placing a misguided faith in multilateralism. As Kristol put it: “The [main] danger is American withdrawal, American timidity, American slowness... The danger is not that we’re going to do too much. The danger is that we’re going to do too little.” Prestige was slipping away because, despite its superior status, the United States tolerated brazen offenses from lower-ranked recalcitrant and free-riding challengers. As Wolfowitz argued while