

## Neoconservatives and "Trotskyism"

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*I was a young Trotskyist for 18 months or so ... but even when I was in it,  
I couldn't quite take it seriously.<sup>1</sup>*

—Irving Kristol

*I didn't know what a Trotskyite was until Dan Bell explained it to me. I'm  
still not sure I can repeat the definition.<sup>2</sup>*

—James Q. Wilson

In one of the first in-depth studies on neoconservatism, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (1978), Peter Steinfels observed that it is impossible to understand the neoconservatives without understanding their history. Yet today, as a result of a civil war within American conservatism, it is precisely the history of "the neocons" that is being distorted through a polemical campaign aimed at prominent neoconservatives and the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Leading the campaign against the neocons are the self-styled paleoconservatives, an intellectual faction made up of libertarians, right-wing populists, and traditionalist conservatives who consider themselves the legitimate successors to the pre-Cold War Old Right. In an attempt to discredit the neocons' conservative credentials, the "paleocons" have forcefully asserted that neoconservatism is a descendant of American Trotskyism, and that neoconservatives continue to be influenced by Leon Trotsky in their views on foreign policy. Reflecting a propensity for flirting dangerously with—when not openly embracing—anti-semitism, paleoconservatives have even charged that a "cabal of Jewish neocons" is manipulating US foreign policy and implementing Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution from the White House.<sup>3</sup>

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\*An earlier somewhat different version of this article appeared at [www.enterstage.com](http://www.enterstage.com).

<sup>1</sup>Irving Kristol in Peter Collier and David Horowitz (eds.), *Second Thoughts: Former Radicals Look Back at the Sixties* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1989), 183.

<sup>2</sup>James Q. Wilson, in symposium, "Neoconservatism: pro and con," *Partisan Review*, XLVII(4) (1980), 508.

<sup>3</sup>On paleoconservative anti-semitism see William F. Buckley, "In search of anti-semitism," *National Review* (December 30, 1991). More recently, see Jonah Goldberg, "The end of neoconservatism," *National Review Online* (May 21, 2003), <http://www.nationalreview.com/goldberg/goldberg052103.asp> (May 30, 2003), and David Frum, "Unpatriotic conservatives," *National Review* (April 7, 2003), <http://www.nationalreview.com/frum/frum031903.asp> (May 30, 2003). For a particularly blatant example of the open anti-semitism on the fringes of paleoconservatism, see Max Shpak, "The fraud of neoconservative anti-communism," *Originaldissent.com* (May 15, 2002), <http://www.originaldissent.com/shpak051502.html> (April 15, 2003). For an example of the "dual loyalty"

The battle between the neo- and paleo-wings of conservatism began in the early 1980s, triggered by paleocon resentment as neocons began attaining positions of influence and prominence in conservative think tanks and the Reagan administration. The differences between the two camps are substantial, including such issues as the size and role of the federal government, immigration and trade policy, and in the end reflect different philosophical approaches to modernity and modern American life.<sup>4</sup> Further differences include paleoconservatism's nativism and its openness to extreme racialist theories, two features that are notably absent from neoconservatism. Yet the issue that motivated the original Old Right more than any other, and which today continues to drive its self-proclaimed progeny, is American foreign policy. So, while the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion was first coined as a polemical tool against the neocons in the early days of the dispute, it was not until after the first Gulf War in 1991 that the isolationist paleocons began to use it in a concerted manner. In the period since the attacks of 9/11, with the rise of foreign policy issues to the forefront of American political life—and especially with the debate that erupted over going to war with Iraq in late 2002—the assertion has become one of the paleoconservatives' main weapons in the ongoing feud. In the past three years, paleoconservative websites and magazines such as The Center for Libertarian Studies' *LewRockwell.com*, The Randolph Bourne Institute's *Antiwar.com*, Pat Buchanan's *The American Conservative* and the Rockford Institute's *Chronicles*, have all regularly featured prominent articles focusing on the supposed historical and political-ideological links between neoconservatism and American Trotskyism.

Unlike the neocons, paleoconservatives have had little impact outside of conservative intellectual circles. Yet their "Trotskyist neocon" assertion has rapidly entered mainstream political discussion. To a large degree this is due to the efforts of liberal journalists, such as Michael Lind and William Pfaff, who helped popularize the neoconservative-as-Trotskyist theme both before and during the invasion of Iraq in early 2003. The assertion has gained such widespread currency that a writer as far removed from paleoconservatism (or liberalism) as *Vanity Fair*'s Sam Tanenhaus can claim that "... a belated species of Trotskyism has at last established itself in the White House."<sup>5</sup> Ostensibly, serious discussions about neoconservative "Trotskyism" have also appeared in mainstream newspapers throughout the world, from Canada's

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Footnote continued

charge, see Russell Kirk, "The neoconservatives: an endangered species," in *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr: ISI Press, 1993), 180.

<sup>4</sup>See Adam Wolfson, "Conservatives and neoconservatives," *The Public Interest*, No. 154 (Winter 2004), 32–48. On paleoconservatism see also Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement, Revised Edition* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993). For a surprisingly warm account of the paleos from a hard left critic, see Sara Diamond, "Old Right soldiers never die," in *Facing the Wrath: Confronting the Right in Dangerous Times* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Sam Tanenhaus, "Hello to all that: the irony behind the demise of the *Partisan Review*," *Slate* (April 16, 2003), <http://slate.msn.com/id/2081610> (April 24, 2003).

*National Post* to Hong Kong's *Asia Times Online*.<sup>6</sup> And even as respected a foreign policy commentator as Dimitri K. Simes, co-publisher of *The National Interest*, has joined the "Trotskyist neocon" chorus, writing in *Foreign Affairs* that the neoconservatives' belief in "permanent worldwide revolution" owes more to the founder of the Bolshevik Red Army than to "America's forefathers."<sup>7</sup>

But despite its current popularity, the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion contributes nothing to our understanding of the origins, or the nature, of neoconservatism. While paleocons do not go so far as to allege that neocons literally *are* Trotskyists (a claim whose absurdity would quickly relegate them to the status of the John Birch Society), their assertion is nonetheless a collection of exaggerations, misrepresentations, and even outright falsifications. In fact, the supposed connection between neoconservatism and Trotskyism is the single biggest myth currently being propagated about the neocons. Instead of illuminating the ideas and personalities that gave rise to neoconservatism, and which today have propelled it to the high point of its political influence, the assertion does the exact opposite: it obfuscates them through a distortion of the real histories of both neoconservatism and American Trotskyism.

There are four different versions of the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion, all of which have been used extensively in paleoconservative polemics. The first is that the genesis or "roots" of neoconservatism lie in the American Trotskyist movement, and, specifically, that the first generation of neoconservatives were former Trotskyists. In this version special attention is given to Irving Kristol, who is pilloried as the original fifth columnist of Trotskyist influence inside conservatism. The second version holds that members of the second, current generation of neoconservatives were once followers of the heretical Trotskyist Max Shachtman. Through them, it is claimed, neoconservatism has retained some of the major principles, albeit in modified form, of "Shachtmanism." The third is the claim that neoconservatism has retained the "methods" and "characteristics" of Trotskyism, especially as exhibited by the original neocons, and is therefore a form of "inverted" Trotskyism. The last and perhaps most well-known version is that neoconservatives adhere to Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, and have put the theory into practice through their roles in the Bush administration.

Given that the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion is fundamentally a polemical device rather than a scholarly evaluation of neoconservatism, this does raise the question of the usefulness of undertaking a comprehensive critique. I would argue that there are three compelling reasons to do so. The first is that despite both its ubiquitousness and oxymoronic character—a combination that usually attracts speedy rebuttals—the paleoconservative assertion so far remains unchallenged. It is true that the charge of neocon "Trotskyism" was

<sup>6</sup>Jeet Heer, "Trotsky's ghost wandering the White House," *National Post* (June 7, 2003); Jim Lobe, "What is a neo-conservative anyway?" *Asia Times Online* (August 13, 2003), [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front\\_Page/EH13Aa01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/EH13Aa01.html) (August 14, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Dimitri K. Simes, "America's imperial dilemma," *Foreign Affairs* (November–December, 2003), 95.

addressed by Alan Wald, a leading historian of the American left, in an exchange with Michael Lind on the *History News Network* website, and also by Joshua Muravchik, a prominent neoconservative, who responded to the charge within a broader article in *Commentary*.<sup>8</sup> But while both their critiques were incisive, Wald and Muravchik chose to focus on the liberal pundits who helped popularize the accusation, rather than on the paleoconservatives who created it. And if both authors were effective in pointing out the lack of fact behind certain parts of the assertion, their articles were (understandably, given where they appeared) brief and journalistic rather than historical and systematic. As a result, both addressed only the first and fourth versions of the assertion described above. An in-depth analysis of paleoconservative writings allows one to go to the source of the assertion and make a more definitive assessment.

The second and ultimately more important reason for a comprehensive critique of the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion is that it allows for a clarification of the actual historical relation between the neoconservatives and American Trotskyism, and the relation between neoconservatism, American Trotskyism and American Socialism. Simply put, the treatment that this area has received at the hands of the paleoconservatives has been so flawed and misleading that an effort must be made to restore a legitimate historical framework for future discussion. The distortions have been so egregious that even an initial attempt at clarification such as this one can make a worthwhile contribution towards that end. And the final reason for a more thorough critique is that if the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion is primarily polemical and journalistic, it does in some of its versions—above all in the one that accuses the neocons of "inverted" Trotskyism—draw on a specific approach to Trotskyism that has been used by scholars when writing about the history of neoconservatism. Gary Dorrien and John B. Judis in particular have used this approach when discussing Trotskyism within their influential works on the neoconservatives. A systematic critique allows for an examination of this exceptionally inadequate methodology that often underlies the paleoconservative polemics.

### **The "Trotskyist Roots" of Neoconservatism**

As early as the mid-1980s, shortly after the feud between paleocons and neocons began, paleoconservatives were already commenting on the supposed Trotskyist pasts of the original neoconservatives. At an infamously raucous debate between conservatives held at the Philadelphia Society in 1986, the paleoconservative historian Stephen J. Tonsor expressed dismay that "former Marxists" had come to play such a dominant role within conservatism, and quipped that had Trotsky not been assassinated he would no doubt be

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<sup>8</sup>Alan Wald, "Are Trotskyites running the Pentagon?" *History News Network* (July 23, 2003), <http://hnn.us/articles/1514.html> (August 1, 2003); Alan Wald, "Who is smearing whom?" *History News Network* (July 30, 2003), <http://hnn.us/articles/1536.html> (August 1, 2003); Joshua Muravchik, "The neoconservative cabal," *Commentary* (September 1, 2003).

working for the Hoover Institute and writing articles for *Commentary*.<sup>9</sup> But it was not until shortly after the Gulf War of 1991 that the claim about neoconservatism's "Trotskyist roots" took the form in which we know it today. Within weeks of the war ending, Leon Hadar of the libertarian Cato Institute laid out the now widely accepted view in an article in the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*:

Among the major figures in the [neoconservative] movement were former Trotskyites who studied in the '30s and '40s at the then "poor man's Harvard," the City College of New York, a center for socialist activism. They included Irving Kristol, who in the 1950s launched an anti-Soviet CIA front, the International Congress for Cultural Freedom; Norman Podhoretz, the editor of the American Jewish Committee's monthly magazine *Commentary*, which he turned into a major neoconservative outlet; Podhoretz's wife, Midge Decter, the chairperson of the now-defunct Committee on the Free World; sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell; and Democratic Party pamphleteer Ben Wattenberg.<sup>10</sup>

The only problem with Hadar's description of the original neocons as "former Trotskyites" who attended CCNY is that it is almost completely false. The first sign of this is in Hadar's lumping together of neoconservatives who by virtue of their age alone could not possibly have attended CCNY together. Thus, for example, Irving Kristol, who attended CCNY and was indeed briefly a Trotskyist in the late 1930s, was born in 1920, whereas Ben Wattenberg was born in 1933, making him all of four years old when Kristol entered CCNY in 1937. In fact Wattenberg never even attended CCNY, graduating instead from Hobart College in upstate New York in 1955.<sup>11</sup> Nor, *contra* Hadar, was Wattenberg ever a Trotskyist or even a Marxist. As one prominent neocon who has known Wattenberg for many years put it, the latter has always been "unambivalently pro-capitalist."<sup>12</sup> Hadar fares no better with two of the other neocons he mentions, Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter—neither of whom attended CCNY, and neither of whom was ever a Marxist, let alone a radical Trotskyite. Podhoretz, a full 10 years younger than Kristol, in fact *opened* his 1979 political autobiography with the following first lines: "When I arrived at Columbia College in 1946 I was not quite 17 years old, and ... my views were the standard views of those American liberals who were suspicious of America and sympathetic to the Soviet Union ...."<sup>13</sup> As for Decter, also almost a decade younger than Kristol, her first experience with political

<sup>9</sup>Stephen J. Tonsor, "Why I too am not a neoconservative," *National Review* (June 20, 1986), 55.

<sup>10</sup>Leon T. Hadar, "The 'Neocons': from the Cold War to the 'global Intifada'," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (April, 1991), <http://www.washington-report.org/backissues/0491/9104027.htm> (May 10, 2003).

<sup>11</sup>For a brief bio of Wattenberg see: "About Ben Wattenberg," *Think Tank with Ben Wattenberg*, PBS Website (June 1, 2003), [http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/about\\_ben.html](http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/about_ben.html).

<sup>12</sup>E-mail from Joshua Muravchik, July 14, 2003.

<sup>13</sup>Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 21.

activism came not in the 1930s, campaigning for world revolution in her elementary school, but in the early 1970s, campaigning along with other neoconservatives for the defeat of George McGovern in the Democratic primaries.<sup>14</sup>

The last two original neoconservatives mentioned by Hadar, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell, are the only ones other than Kristol to have attended CCNY in the late 1930s. But again, and this is the heart of the matter, neither was ever a Trotskyist. While socially close to the young Trotskyists at CCNY, the young Nathan Glazer instead opted to join the Left Socialists–Zionists.<sup>15</sup> For his part, Daniel Bell first joined the youth wing of Norman Thomas's Socialist Party, the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), in the early 1930s, and then joined the ardently anti-Communist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) towards the end of the decade. Whether the Daniel Bell of those years can accurately be called a Marxist is still the subject of debate among specialists.<sup>16</sup> But there is no debate regarding Bell's attitude towards Trotskyism: he consistently and intensely opposed it. As Bell himself wrote in an unequivocally clear letter to the editor of the SDF's *The New Leader* in 1939, "Trotskyism, as a derivative of Leninism, is alien to [freedom of thought and conscience] and must be fought."<sup>17</sup> And in radical politics in 1939, one did not choose one's words lightly. This leaves Irving Kristol as the *only* neoconservative among the six mentioned by Hadar to have actually ever been a Trotskyist—and even that statement requires some qualification, as we will see below.

Sloppy research and outright fabrications aside, part of the reason behind the recurrent exaggeration of the "Trotskyist roots" of the neoconservatives lies in their frequent conflation with their parent grouping, the New York Intellectuals. As Alan Wald detailed in the most authoritative work on the impact of Trotskyism on the New York Intellectuals, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930's to the 1980's* (1987), many of the latter group did indeed pass through the different shades of Trotskyism available in the 1930s and 1940s. From its different generations one can list: Elliot Cohen, Sidney Hook (a brief and rather hesitant fellow traveler), Herbert Solow, Meyer Schapiro, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, Harold Rosenberg, Dwight McDonald, and Clement Greenberg. There was also the infamous and fractious relationship between Trotsky and William Phillips and Philip Rahv, the founding editors of the recently deceased *Partisan Review*.

But the original neoconservative "brain trust" of the 1970s did not include

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<sup>14</sup>Midge Decter, *An Old Wives' Tale: My Seven Decades in Love and War* (New York: Regan Books, 2001), 122.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: the New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup>See Nathan Liebowitz, *Daniel Bell and the Agony of Modern Liberalism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985); and Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>Daniel Bell, "Trotskyism echoes Stalinite hypocrisy" (Letter to the Editor), *The New Leader*, 9 (September, 1939), 8, cited in Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, 62.

any of the above New York Intellectuals associated with Trotskyism.<sup>18</sup> Instead, it consisted of Kristol, Glazer, Bell, Podhoretz and Seymour Martin Lipset—and of *this* group, only two were ever involved, even briefly, with Trotskyism: Kristol and Lipset. One can even add to this list of former Trotskyites the names of two less influential neoconservatives, although eminent scholars in their own right: the historian and wife of Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and the late political scientist Martin Diamond. The result is a grand total of four original neocons that passed through the ranks of Trotskyism. If one considers the first generation neoconservatives mentioned so far, such as Bell, Glazer, Wattenberg, Podhoretz and Decter, none of whom were Trotskyists, and then one considers such prominent early neoconservatives as Daniel Patrick Moynahan, James Q. Wilson, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Michael Novak, Edward Banfield, Robert Nisbet, Peter Berger, Hilton Kramer, and Walter Laqueur (and indeed one could go on); in other words, if one looks at the first generation of neoconservatives *as a whole*, their so-called "Trotskyist roots" are shown to be a great deal smaller and weaker than paleoconservatives so insistently claim.

More recently, as the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion has taken an increasingly prominent place in paleoconservative polemics, the trend has been away from inventing fictitious Trotskyist pasts for first generation neoconservatives, and towards using insinuations that leave the question of who was a Trotskyist deliberately unanswered. And understandably so, as there is more mileage to be had in implying that all of the original neoconservatives were former Trotskyists than by continuously recycling the names of the four that were. A good example of this vagueness is provided by the paleocon historian Paul Gottfried. In 1988, Gottfried co-authored *The Conservative Movement*, a measured historical study of post-war intellectual conservatism that focused on the neo-paleo divide, and in which he made no mention of the supposed "Trotskyist roots" of neoconservatism. Yet subsequent to the Gulf War of 1991, Gottfried added an awkward and unsubstantiated claim about neoconservatism's "Trotskyist residues" to a revised 1993 edition of the book.<sup>19</sup> Today he decries on the *LewRockwell.com* website an unnamed "... Trotskyist ascendancy over the conservative movement that began in the seventies and eighties" in which neoconservatives, themselves a "leftist revolutionary movement," have "... dragged Trotskyist themes, along with other baggage, into the conservative movement."<sup>20</sup> No names are provided by Gottfried for the simple reason that it would be impossible to expose as former Trotskyists any of the original neoconservatives other than the four mentioned above—whose numbers hardly merit the claim of a "Trotskyist ascendancy."

<sup>18</sup>The term "brain trust" is taken from Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 369.

<sup>19</sup>See Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988); and Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement, Revised Edition*, 161.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Gottfried, "The Trotsky hour," *LewRockwell.com* (March 6, 2003), <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gottfried/gottfried46.html> (May 10, 2003).

The entire element of truth to the connection between Trotskyism and the genesis of neoconservatism is that less than a handful of first-generation neoconservatives were briefly Trotskyites while in their teens and early 20s. But this is hardly serious ground on which to talk about the "Trotskyist roots" of the original neoconservatives as a whole. For the most part, the original neocons of the early 1970s came to conservatism as Cold War liberals of almost two decades who were reacting to the excesses of 1960s radicalism, the rise of black nationalism, the increasing hostility towards Israel, and the leftward drift of the Democratic Party—not as adherents of a Trotskyism that four of them had rejected some 30 years earlier. A more perceptive comment about the original neoconservatives is the one offered by Mark Gerson, who in the introduction to his *Neoconservative Reader* (1996) described them as "... a prominent group of intellectuals who, once *considered* to be on the left, are now on the right" (emphasis in original).<sup>21</sup> While less sensationalistic than the allegations of "Trotskyism," such a statement comes closer to capturing the actual trajectory of the future neocons after the 1940s. Ultimately, to look back to the brief and youthful political allegiance of a small minority of neocons, and to find in that the "roots" of neoconservatism, is polemical point-scoring that cannot be substantiated with historical evidence.

### The "Trotskyism" of Irving Kristol

If the "Trotskyist roots" of the first-generation neoconservatives have been greatly exaggerated, what about those who actually were involved with Trotskyism? How much of an impact did Trotskyism have on their thinking? Presumably on this level a more credible case could be made for a lasting Trotskyite influence on neoconservatism. But it is precisely here that the lack of substance of the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion emerges, for there is nothing in any of the neoconservatives' vast political, sociological, or cultural writings that points to the remotest influence of Trotskyism. Instead, those propagating the assertion have been forced to rely only on whatever anecdotal evidence is available to make their case. Thus Irving Kristol, who wrote an autobiographical essay entitled "Memoirs of a Trotskyist" and has sprinkled mentions of his youthful political dalliance throughout his writings, is more often accused of still being influenced by Trotskyism than Seymour Martin Lipset, who was also a Trotskyist but has not made a similar use of his own brief radical past.

For paleocon polemicists, it matters little that Kristol has spent almost his entire adult life as one of America's most prolific and high-profile intellectual proponents of capitalism and liberal democracy. It matters little, because Kristol had the temerity to write—and supposedly did so "with relish"—that "I regard myself as lucky to have been a young Trotskyite and I have not a single

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<sup>21</sup>Mark Gerson (ed.), *The Essential Neoconservative Reader* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1996), xiii.



bitter memory."<sup>22</sup> Just as incriminating is Kristol's claim to have learned how to construct an argument by reading Trotskyist theoretical journals, and to have "never heard an equal" to the marathon debate in 1940 that heralded the first major split among Trotskyists in the US.<sup>23</sup> But if the lack of seriousness in the paleocon accusations is evident, it does raise the question of exactly how much of a Trotskyist Irving Kristol actually was. And if one closely examines this part of his past, a different picture emerges from the one that has been conjured up by the polemicists.

Kristol was involved in the late 1930s, still in his teens, in the milieu of the young Jewish intellectuals that frequented the now infamous Alcove No.1 at CCNY. While there he was a fellow traveler of the small group of Trotskyist students who belonged to the youth wing of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), known as the Young People's Socialist League-Fourth International (YPSL-FI). While steeped in the world of hyper-intellectual debating at CCNY, Kristol was not an SWP or YPSL-FI member, and certainly not a full-blown Trotskyist ideologue, as those seeking to exaggerate his Trotskyist credentials often imply. Infamously, James P. Cannon, the Irish-American leader of the Trotskyists, once admonished Kristol and his friend and fellow-CCNYer Earl Raab for *not* joining the SWP. From Mexico, Trotsky himself cast a wary eye on the YPSLs and fellow travelers such as Kristol and Raab because of their "lack of experience" and, more damningly, for their "petty bourgeois" backgrounds.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Cannon's scoldings, Kristol never did join the "official" Trotskyists of the SWP, but rather the heretical offshoot led by Max Shachtman, the Workers' Party (WP), in 1940. More importantly, Kristol belonged to a small intra-party faction inside the WP known as the "Shermanites" which was led by future sociologist Philip Selznick, and included Lipset, Himmelfarb, and Diamond, i.e. the only other neoconservatives to have been associated with Trotskyism. What is important here, and what for the most part has been overlooked, is that the Shermanites considered not only Stalinism but also "Bolshevism," which in their context meant Trotskyism, to be "... bureaucratic, totalitarian, and undemocratic."<sup>25</sup> Decisive to Kristol and the others' rejection of Marxism and Trotskyism was Robert Michels' *Political Parties* (1915), which was introduced to the group by Selznick.<sup>26</sup> This "premature" anti-communism was so anathema to Shachtman that, after Kristol and the tiny band of Shermanites resigned from the Workers' Party in 1941, a mere *one year* after they had joined, they were retroactively expelled.

<sup>22</sup>Daniel McCarthy, "Springtime for Trotsky," *LewRockwell.com* (November 6, 2001), <http://www.lewrockwell.com/dmccarthy/dmccarthy23.html> (May 10, 2003).

<sup>23</sup>Irving Kristol, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 479.

<sup>24</sup>Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1990), 63.

<sup>25</sup>Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930's to the 1980's* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 350.

<sup>26</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset, "Steady work: an academic memoir," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22 (1996), 1-27.

The journal that Kristol and the Shermanites went on to briefly publish after their expulsion from the Workers Party, *Enquiry*, far from providing "conventional Marxist fare" as has been claimed by one scholar, in fact consisted of the exact opposite: substantive critiques of Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism, all the more noteworthy for the youthfulness of the authors.<sup>27</sup>

Looking beyond both journalistic reminiscences and polemically motivated exaggerations, a more balanced appraisal of Irving Kristol's Trotskyism is that he was involved on the intellectually energetic margins of the movement, and then briefly passed through the movement itself while maintaining a non-Trotskyist—and arguably, given the Shermanites' emphasis on political democracy, a *non-Marxist*—political outlook. As Kristol himself would remark in later years, "I have never considered myself to be an 'ex-Trotskyist' in the sense that some people conceive of themselves as 'ex-communists'. The experience was never that important to me ...."<sup>28</sup> By the end of the Second World War, during which Kristol saw service with the US Army in Europe, he was no longer a socialist of any stripe. Without a doubt Kristol was in many ways shaped by those years of depression and war, as any teenager living through an intense era such as the 1930s and 1940s would be. But to attribute his later political views—and even, as is sometimes done, his *behavioral* characteristics—to the influence of Trotskyism greatly overstates Kristol's brief and superficial flirtation with that movement, and credits Trotskyism with an influence far beyond that of a mere political ideology.

### The Question of "Shachtmanism"

While paleocons accuse first-generation neoconservatives of having been Trotskyites, they usually charge today's second-generation neocons with Trotskyism indirectly, by virtue of supposedly having been "Shachtmanites." Those meriting this accusation are the small minority of today's neoconservatives who were members of the Socialist Party–Social Democratic Federation/Young People's Socialist League (SP–SDF/YPSL), and later the Social Democrats USA, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The supposed link with Trotskyism comes in the form of Max Shachtman, the leader of the 1940 split from official Trotskyism that Kristol and the Shermanites briefly adhered to, who would later go on to join the Socialist Party and play a major role in that party's right wing from the late 1950s to his death in 1972. Shachtman occupies a fascinating place in the history of Marxism in the US for moving, over the span of 20 years, all the way from Trotskyism to a fervently anti-communist version of social democracy.<sup>29</sup> What makes this move particularly intriguing is that

<sup>27</sup>Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 71. See *Enquiry*, 1–2 (1942–45), particularly the articles by Philip Selznick.

<sup>28</sup>Irving Kristol, "My Cold War," in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, 483.

<sup>29</sup>On Shachtman, see Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and his Left* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994); see also Eric Chester, *Socialists and the Ballot Box* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985).

Shachtman carried it out while doggedly maintaining an orthodox Marxist phraseology that had increasingly little relevance to his actual politics. Since a small number of second-generation neocons, such as Joshua Muravchik and Carl Gershman, were in leadership roles in the Socialist Party, YPSL, and Social Democrats USA during the 1960s and 1970s, there is indeed an element of truth to a connection between Shachtman and a few of today's neoconservatives.

But what has conveniently been forgotten by the paleocons amidst their frantic references to Shachtman's "Trotskyism" is that he broke definitively with his own unique version of that ideology in the mid-1950s, even before dissolving the International Socialist League (ISL, successor to the Workers' Party) and joining the Socialist Party in 1958. Abandoning quasi-Trotskyite "Shachtmanism" was in fact a *precondition* set by the SP leadership for allowing Shachtman and his followers to join the party. The historian Robert J. Alexander, who was himself active in the Socialist Party in those years, notes that after 1958 the ideological distinctions inside the SP between the ex-ISL cadre and the pre-1958 Socialists basically disappeared.<sup>30</sup> Once inside the party, Shachtman and the former members of the ISL carried on squarely in the tradition of the right-wing socialist "Old Guard" that had split away in the 1930s to form the Social Democratic Federation and had rejoined the SP shortly before Shachtman.<sup>31</sup> Like the Old Guard before them, the former ISLers were staunchly anti-Communist, closely supportive of the established trade union leaderships, Marxist in their official discourse (albeit decreasingly so), and crucially, were oriented towards working within the Democratic Party—something even the original Old Guard itself had not been willing to do. While the one-time Shachtmanites would maintain close factional ties inside the Socialist Party, those ties were now based on a type of politics with deep roots on the right wing of American socialism, rather than on the quasi-Trotskyism that they had consciously discarded.

None of this history seems to matter to the paleoconservative polemicists. In paleocon folklore, not only do Shachtman and the former ISLers remain "Trotskyists" beyond the late 1950s, but the Socialist Party itself is somehow transformed into a Trotskyite organization. Only by means of such blatant falsehoods can Srdja Trifkovic, writing in the on-line version of *Chronicles*, claim that second-generation neoconservatives, "... including Joshua Muravchik, and Carl Gershman, came to neoconservatism through the Socialist Party at a time when it was Trotskyite in outlook and politics."<sup>32</sup> In reality, the Socialist Party itself was never "Trotskyite," nor did any Trotskyists play a role inside it after their expulsion from the party back in the late 1930s. For the

<sup>30</sup>Robert Alexander, *International Trotskyism: 1929–1985* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 812–813. See also Chester, *Socialists and the Ballot Box*, 135, 146.

<sup>31</sup>On the Old Guard see Frank A. Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930's* (Indiana University Press, 1974).

<sup>32</sup>Srdja Trifkovic, "Neoconservatism, where Trotsky meets Stalin and Hitler," *Chronicles Extra* (July 23, 2003), <http://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/News/Trifkovic/NewsST072303.html> (July 27, 2003).

Socialists, Trotskyism was in fact a political *opponent*, especially as represented by the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance, by the time that Muravchik and Penn Kemble (together with Michael Harrington) led the party and its youth wing during the late 1960s. Trotskyism was not even remotely an issue for the Socialists by the time Carl Gershman moved to the helm of the successor of the right wing of the party, the Social Democrats USA, following the three-way split in 1972.

The very labeling of the few ex-Socialist neocons as “former Shachtmanites” is inaccurate and misleading since it implies that they share Max Shachtman’s historical connection to Trotskyism, which they do not. Paleoconservative writer Justin Raimondo makes the motivation behind the label clear when he writes in *Anti-War.com*, that “... it was Shachtman’s particular schismatic brand of Trotskyism, as advocated by the ‘Yipsels’, as Comrade Muravchik and his fellow young commies called themselves, that over time was transmuted into a militant push for global ‘democracy’.”<sup>33</sup> However, this attempt to link the future neoconservatives to Shachtmanism is a confused amalgam of eras and ideologies that gets the history completely wrong. The main tenets of the “schismatic brand of Trotskyism” that Raimondo refers to were a revolutionary opposition to capitalism, a “third camp” orientation (“neither Washington nor Moscow”), the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, and support for an independent labor party in the United States. That was “Shachtmanism” as adhered to by the Workers Party and the ISL in the 1940s and 1950s, before the Shachtmanites dissolved into the Socialist Party.<sup>34</sup> But not only did Muravchik, Gershman, and the other young Socialists in the late 1960s and 1970s (none of whom was old enough to have belonged to the ISL), not advocate that type of Shachtmanite politics, not even Shachtman himself or any of the other former Shachtmanites still held those views, having abandoned them more than a decade earlier in their move to right-wing social democracy.

To be sure, the anti-communist young Socialists of the late 1960s who would one day become neoconservatives considered Shachtman a charismatic elder statesman. But doing so did not make them “Shachtmanites,” much less did it make them “Trotskyites.” It made them right-wing socialists. Commenting on this all too common tendency of labeling those on the right wing of the Socialist Party as “Shachtmanites,” Muravchik, who was National Chairman of the YPSL between 1968 and 1973, has put it succinctly: “I loved Shachtman’s lectures, but what I learned from them had nothing to do with the Trotskyite arcana that had once been the substance of Shachtmanism. It had everything

<sup>33</sup>Justin Raimondo, “Smoking gun,” *Anti-War.com* (May 9, 2003), <http://www.antiwar.com/justin/j050903.html> (May 10, 2003).

<sup>34</sup>A compelling case can be made that the legacy of Shachtmanism is found not in the right wing of social democracy, but in the International Socialist current that split from the SP-SDF/YPSL in the early 1960s and was led by long-time Shachtmanite Hal Draper. See Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 899; and also Milton Fisk, *Socialism from below in the United States: The Origins of the International Socialist Organization* (Cleveland: Hera Press, 1977).

to do with the evil nature of communism."<sup>35</sup> It is an inability to distinguish between a specific form of revolutionary Marxism ("Shachtmanism") and a uniquely American version of right-wing socialism that can be traced back to the 1930s, that underlies the confused allegations hurled by paleoconservatives at today's neocons.

### "Inverted" Trotskyism

A more sophisticated version of the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion focuses not on the pasts of individual neoconservatives but on the impact that Trotskyism has supposedly had on neoconservatism as a school of thought. The neoconservatism-as-inverted-Trotskyism approach is best exemplified by J.P. Zmirak in his article entitled "America the abstraction," which appeared in Pat Buchanan's *The American Conservative*, as well as in a followup piece, "Lies, damn lies, and anti-semitism" that was posted on the website of the America's Future Foundation. Zmirak maintains that the former Trotskyists who became Cold War anti-Communists, such as Kristol, Sidney Hook (who in fact was never a Trotskyist), and particularly James Burnham, brought with them a "... strong tendency towards pure abstraction, towards viewing national questions purely in ideological terms ...."<sup>36</sup> According to Zmirak, this abstraction would later become a hallmark of neoconservatism itself, and "... in some respects mirrors the Trotskyism [the neoconservatives] once held."<sup>37</sup>

While more sophisticated than the smears of the polemicists, this version of the assertion is perhaps even more flawed with regards to a connection between Trotskyism and neoconservatism. The "inverted" thesis has its roots at least in part in academic works on neoconservatism that appeared in the 1990s. In particular, it can be traced back to Garry Dorrien's *The Neoconservative Mind* (1993), which Zmirak cites in his article, and to a long book review by John B. Judis of John Ehrman's *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, entitled "Trotskyism to anachronism: the neoconservative revolution," that appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1995. In his book, Dorrien argues for the centrality of James Burnham, a key leader of the American Trotskyists in the 1930s and then an influential conservative theorist after the Second World War, as an ideological precursor of the neoconservatives. One of Dorrien's main contentions is that through Burnham and later Irving Kristol, neoconservatism retained the "... rhetorical methods ..." and "... chief concepts ..." of Trotskyism.<sup>38</sup> This is evident in Burnham and Kristol's aggressive polemics and above all in their

<sup>35</sup>Joshua Muravchik, "Socialists of America, disunited," *The Weekly Standard* (August 28, 2000), [http://www.aei.org/news/newsID.11887,filter./news\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/news/newsID.11887,filter./news_detail.asp) (May 15, 2003).

<sup>36</sup>J.P. Zmirak, "America the abstraction," *The American Conservative* (January 13, 2003), [http://www.amconmag.com/01\\_13\\_03/cover7.html](http://www.amconmag.com/01_13_03/cover7.html) (July 26, 2003).

<sup>37</sup>J.P. Zmirak, "Lies, damned lies, and anti-semitism," *America's Future Foundation* (July 24, 2003), <http://www.americasfuture.org/viewBrainwash.cfm?pubid=215> (July 26, 2003).

<sup>38</sup>Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 381, 36.

"contempt" for liberalism, which was brought over, according to Dorrien, directly from Trotskyism.

In his *Foreign Affairs* book review, Judis uses the same methodology as Dorrien with regards to the legacy of Trotskyism on neoconservative thought, and is more explicit in using the term "inverted Trotskyism." Writing specifically on the neoconservative view of foreign policy, Judis maintains that "Neoconservatism was a kind of inverted Trotskyism, which sought to 'export democracy', in Muravchik's words, in the same way that Trotsky originally envisaged exporting socialism," and that "... [The] neoconservatives who went through the Trotskyist and socialist movements came to see foreign policy as a crusade, the goal of which was first global socialism, then social democracy, and finally democratic capitalism. They never saw foreign policy in terms of national interest or balance of power." Behind this lay the fact that "What both the older and younger neoconservatives absorbed from their [Trotskyist] past was an idealistic concept of internationalism."<sup>39</sup>

Aside from the historical inaccuracies, the main weakness of the Dorrien/Judis approach used by Zmirak is, ironically, its own excessive abstraction. The approach is based on abstracting Trotskyism from the concepts that define it as a Marxist political ideology, such as the anti-capitalist class struggle and proletarian internationalism, and those that define it as a specific school within Marxism, such as the need for a Fourth International and the transitional program. As archaic and even quixotic as those principles may be, without them the term "Trotskyism" is reduced to a meaningless label. It then becomes deceptively easy to refer to anything as "inverted" Trotskyism, from an aggressive polemical style and "contempt" for liberalism as argued by Dorrien, to an "idealist" internationalism as argued by Judis. But what does that really say? Can such commonplace characteristics and widely held concepts be considered in any way specific to, or constitutive of, Trotskyism as a political ideology? This approach focuses on elements that are at best *incidental* to Trotskyism, and for that reason it misleads more than it illuminates with regards to a connection with neoconservatism.

The "inverted" methodology is ultimately disastrous not just as an approach to Trotskyism but for historical inquiry in general. If one were to apply it consistently to the post-war history of American conservatism, precious little would be left that one could "legitimately" call conservative. One need only consider that the integration of the different warring strands of conservatism that occurred after World War II, known as "fusionism," was above all the work of Frank Meyer, a man who had spent 14 years of his life as a member of the American Communist Party.<sup>40</sup> One could also ponder the fact that many

<sup>39</sup>John B. Judis, "Trotskyism to anachronism: the neoconservative revolution," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 1995), <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19950701fareviewessay5058/john-b-judis/trotskyism-to-anachronism-the-neoconservative-revolution.html> (April 24, 2003).

<sup>40</sup>George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1945), 174.

of the leading post-war intellectuals of American conservatism, who helped shape the movement in fundamental ways, hailed initially from the ranks or periphery of Communism either in American or Europe. Aside from Meyer, the ex-Communists include Max Eastman, Will Herberg, John Dos Passos, Whittaker Chambers and William Schlam. As John P. Diggins observed regarding the foremost journal of American conservatism in the 1950s, "About half of the *National Review's* editorial board was, after all, Stalin's gift to the American right."<sup>41</sup> Is post-war American conservatism as a whole then to be dismissed as nothing but "inverted" Stalinism? And was the desire by conservatives to confront and roll back international Communism during the Cold War nothing but "reverse" or "mirror image" proletarian internationalism? At this level of abstraction historical analysis gives way to sheer word play, and the phenomenon of de-radicalization—and indeed the very idea of distinct ideologies—is trivialized.

While neither Garry Dorrien nor John Judis are paleoconservatives, and both are scholars and commentators rather than polemicists, it is the same flawed and superficial approach to Trotskyism found in their work that underlies the paleocons' current allegations. For only by presenting Trotskyism in an overly abstract and generalized manner can one consider Irving Kristol as still having been influenced by this ideology after the early 1940s, and see Max Shachtman as still adhering to it after the mid-1950s, thereby influencing future neocons such as Muravchik and Gershman. Through a definition of Trotskyism so intangible that it can be attributed even to those who became *anti*-Trotskyists, first-generation neoconservatives are transformed from Irving Kristol's famous description as "liberals mugged by reality" into "Trotskyites mugged by reality," while those of the second generation are attributed a "Shachtmanite-Trotskyite" past that was never theirs.

### Permanent Confusion

The final version of the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion is the one that received a great deal of attention during the debate over the war in Iraq, and which contributed the most to the assertion's widespread popularity. It is also the only version that attempts to demonstrate a link between neoconservatism and Trotskyism by addressing Trotskyist theory directly. Perhaps not surprisingly then, it is also the most confused. The contention in this version is that through their support for a foreign policy that promotes the spread of liberal democracy abroad, known as "democratic globalism," and particularly through their vigorous advocacy of war with Iraq, neoconservatives in the US Defense Department, such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, are

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<sup>41</sup>John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 3.

surreptitiously implementing Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution from the White House.<sup>42</sup>

This accusation of "permanent revolution from the White House" is associated primarily with the liberal pundit Michael Lind, who in a much quoted article in the *New Statesman* from April 2003 wrote that "... neoconservative defence intellectuals ... call their revolutionary ideology 'Wilsonianism' (after President Woodrow Wilson), but it is really Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution mingled with the far-right Likud strain of Zionism."<sup>43</sup> Even before Lind, however, the charge had been made by Paris-based columnist William Pfaff, who wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* in December 2002 that "The Bush administration's determination to deal with its problems through military means [...] seems a rightist version of Trotsky's 'permanent revolution,' destroying existing institutions and structures in the millenarian expectation that all this violence will come to an end in a better and happier world."<sup>44</sup> As of August 2003, Pfaff was still insisting in the *Herald* that neoconservatives "... are influenced by the Trotskyist version of Marxist millenarianism that was the intellectual seedbed of the neoconservative movement."<sup>45</sup>

While anti-neocon liberals such as Lind and Pfaff (together with an assortment of conspiracy theorists<sup>46</sup>) have done the most to popularize the idea that neoconservatives adhere to the theory of permanent revolution, it is once again the paleoconservatives that deserve credit for coining this idea—or at least some of the credit, for the actual origins are more varied than one would expect. Paleocon criticism of the aggressive internationalism championed by some of the neocons dates back to the origins of their dispute in the early 1980s. But at that time, the paleos were only accusing the neoconservatives of "neo-Wilsonianism." Explicitly equating the neocons' theory of democratic globalism with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is a more recent

<sup>42</sup>The currently predominant neoconservative approach to foreign policy has been at different times called "democratic globalism," "democratic idealism," "democratic internationalism" and "conservative internationalism." On this approach, see Joshua Muravchik's closely argued *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington: AEI Press, 1991) and Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2000). For recent variations, see Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2004), and Francis Fukuyama, "The neoconservative moment," *The National Interest* (Summer 2004). For a brief discussion of how democratic globalism differs from the view put forward by Jeane Kirkpatrick in the late 1970s, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), 91–94.

<sup>43</sup>Michael Lind, "The weird men behind George W. Bush's war," *New Statesman* (April 7, 2003), <http://www.newamerica.net/index.cfm?pg=article&pubID=1189> (April 24, 2003).

<sup>44</sup>William Pfaff, "Al Qaeda vs. the White House," *International Herald Tribune* (December 28, 2002), <http://iht.com/articles/81589.html> (April 24, 2003).

<sup>45</sup>William Pfaff, "The philosophers of chaos reap a whirlwind," *International Herald Tribune* (August 23, 2003), <http://www.iht.com/articles/107407.html> (August 25, 2003).

<sup>46</sup>For an utterly ridiculous article on George W. Bush's supposed adherence to Trotskyism, see Ted Rall, "Permanent revolution," *Progressive Populist* (February 19, 2003), <http://www.populist.com/02.19.rall.permawar.html> (April 24, 2003).



invention that started during the debates over how to respond to the terrorist attacks of 9/11—and it has some rather surprising roots.

In September 2001, just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon, the *LewRockwell.com* website posted an essay by paleoconservative author Joseph Stromberg critiquing an article by neoconservative scholar Michael Ledeen, provocatively entitled "Creative destruction: how to wage a revolutionary war." In his article, Ledeen argued that it was "... time once again to export the democratic revolution" as the best way to defeat Islamist terrorists.<sup>47</sup> Focusing on the dramatic phraseology used by Ledeen to put forward the democratic globalist concept, and disregarding its more mundane Wilsonian roots, Stromberg went searching for the meaning and origin of the concept in more exotic places. After first rhetorically asking whether the call to "export the democratic revolution" stemmed from "Schumpeter or Bakunin," Stromberg proceeded to quote from a Yugoslav bureaucrat who, at the height of the Sino-Soviet dispute, tried to discredit the supposed Chinese theory of "exporting the revolution by force" by mislabeling it as "Trotskyite."<sup>48</sup> Astoundingly, Stromberg then went on to conflate the so-called Chinese theory (itself a straw-man by the Yugoslavs) with Ledeen's argument, and even chose the very same label, "Trotskyite," to smear Ledeen and the neoconservatives!

But if using Yugoslav propaganda pieces from the 1960s to create a caricature of democratic globalism can be described as overly "imaginative," claiming that said concept owes its origin to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and its supposed call to spread socialism is just as flawed. And it is so for the simple reason that permanent revolution has nothing to do with the question of spreading socialism nor the means by which to do so. Nor, for that matter, does permanent revolution extol upheaval for its own sake or the inherent virtues of unending violence and destruction a viewpoint perhaps more akin to a blend of Georges Sorel and Frantz Fanon, and at any rate one which, when mistakenly attributed to his theory in 1940, Trotsky himself dismissed as "nonsense."<sup>49</sup> In reality, as defined in its final form in the late 1920s, and as accepted in its general outlines by international Trotskyism ever since then, the theory of permanent revolution holds that in third world or "underdeveloped" countries, attempts to carry out the tasks of the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution, such as land reform and "authentic" national independence, would fail unless those attempts led to the seizure of power by the working class through a socialist revolution.<sup>50</sup> Far from a theory of "exporting revolution," whether by military force or by any other means, Trotsky's theory

<sup>47</sup>Michael Ledeen, "Creative destruction," *National Review Online* (September 20, 2001), <http://www.nationalreview.com/contributors/ledeen092001.shtml> (April 24, 2003).

<sup>48</sup>Joseph Stromberg, "Neocons and total war," *LewRockwell.com* (September 27, 2001), <http://www.lewrockwell.com/stromberg/stromberg21.html> (April 24, 2003).

<sup>49</sup>Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 154.

<sup>50</sup>See Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution* (New York: Merit, 1969).

of permanent revolution is above all a theory of the possibility of socialist revolution in the third world through combining and passing over the "historical stage" of a "bourgeois-democratic" revolution.

Even if for the sake of argument one were to accept that, due to an "idealist" internationalism, the theory of permanent revolution did call for the export of socialism by military force, and even if one were to accept the militaristic caricature of democratic globalism created by the paleocons, it would still be mistaken to view permanent revolution as the source of a single, unanimously accepted neoconservative view of foreign policy. One need only note that Irving Kristol—one of the few neoconservatives to have ever been a Trotskyist—has never adhered to an internationalist or "crusading" view of international relations. Kristol has instead argued for "global unilateralism," a hybrid view based on the criteria of American national interest, which situates him closer to foreign policy realism than to an idealist focus on "global democratic revolution."<sup>51</sup> As John Judis himself pointed out in an earlier, more measured article than the one cited in the section on "inverted Trotskyism," even James Burnham, often considered a direct forerunner to the neoconservatives, viewed American foreign policy during the Cold War "... not in terms of a Wilsonian quest for global democracy, but in terms of American national interest."<sup>52</sup> And Burnham had been a *central leader* of the American Trotskyists. Surely, if permanent revolution led directly to democratic globalism and its "global democratic revolution," then what better candidates for having held the latter viewpoint than Kristol and Burnham?

In the end, neither Kristol nor Burnham—both of whom passed through the Trotskyite movement (albeit in vastly different roles), and both of whom were well acquainted with permanent revolution—ever did call for the US to export a "global democratic revolution." On the other hand, neither Michael Ledeen nor Joshua Muravchik—both of whom call for a "globalist" American foreign policy that spreads "democratic revolution" around the world—ever passed through the Trotskyite movement or ever supported the theory of permanent revolution. And the latter can also be said for the other second-generation neoconservatives both inside and outside the White House, such as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, William Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and former director of the CIA R. James Woolsey, none of whom have any connection whatsoever to Trotsky's permanent revolution—other than, were they to become familiar with the details of the theory, in quite naturally opposing it.<sup>53</sup> Fixated on the affinity of

<sup>51</sup>See Christopher C. DeMuth (ed.), *The Reagan Doctrine and Beyond* (Washington, DC: AEI, 1987), 21–30.

<sup>52</sup>John B. Judis, "Apocalypse now and then," *The New Republic* (August 31, 1987), 29.

<sup>53</sup>Through an approach that resembles "six degrees of separation" more than historical research, it has been suggested that, because Wolfowitz, Perle, and Woolsey were influenced by military strategist Albert Wohlstetter in the 1970s and 1980s, and because Wohlstetter had in the 1930s belonged to a breakaway Trotskyist splinter group, this demonstrates a link between neoconservatism and Trotskyism. See Heer, "Trotsky's ghost wandering the White House." For Wohlstetter, see Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 107.

certain neocons for using historically infused rhetoric, the anti-neocon polemicists have concocted an imaginary connection between Trotsky's permanent revolution and the neoconservatives' democratic globalism that does not exist, and indeed, given the actual definition of permanent revolution, could not exist. Such a connection could only be plausible if one were to accept the caricatures of both theories created for the very purpose of "proving" the supposed connection.

Paleoconservative and liberal pundits are of course not the first to misinterpret and ascribe falsehoods to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution for their own polemical ends. As early as the 1920s, Trotsky was responding to straw-man versions of his theory penned by Stalinist and Social Democratic detractors. But even Trotsky himself, who was not particularly known for his sense of humor, would no doubt have shaken his head in bemusement at the charge that American neoconservatives and the Bush administration have used permanent revolution as the basis for undertaking the war in Iraq. After all, it is a war that Trotsky and his followers would have roundly condemned as "imperialist." And "imperialist" is exactly how the few remaining American supporters of permanent revolution today are portraying the current US presence in Iraq—as are, with delicious irony, not the supposedly "Trotskyist" neoconservatives, but none other than the paleoconservatives and liberal pundits themselves.

### **Final Considerations**

The critique of the paleoconservatives' "Trotskyist neocon" assertion developed here can be summarized as follows:

1. Very few (four) of the original neoconservatives were ever Trotskyists. The small minority of neocons that were involved with the movement passed briefly and marginally through it during their late adolescence. No substantive influence from that period remains, other than an opposition to Marxism and Trotskyism, and indeed Socialism of any sort.
2. None of the second-generation neoconservatives were ever "Shachtmanites." A small number of today's neocons were leaders, along with Max Shachtman, of the right wing of the Socialist Party in the late 1960s. However, none of the future neocons ever adhered to the quasi-Trotskyism that characterized historical "Shachtmanism" prior to 1958.
3. The claim that neoconservatism is "inverted Trotskyism" rests on a methodology that uses an excessive degree of abstraction. It focuses on elements that are not central to or definitive of Trotskyism, thus rendering the term meaningless. Such an approach is ultimately flawed and misleading, in that it implies that there is a connection between neoconservatism and Trotskyism that cannot be demonstrated with historical evidence.
4. The accusation that neoconservatives adhere to and are implementing

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is based on either a major misreading or outright ignorance of Trotsky's theory. In attempting to draw a link between permanent revolution and the neoconservative theory of democratic globalism, the accusation misrepresents both theories.

Regardless of which version of the assertion one focuses on, it is clear that there is no substantive link between neoconservatism and American Trotskyism. In order to argue for the existence (and indeed centrality!) of such a link, it is necessary to considerably misrepresent the histories and theories of both movements. A systematic examination of the paleoconservatives' "Trotskyist neocon" assertion shows that it cannot stand up to scrutiny in light of the easily accessible historical evidence.

It is worth noting that factional conflict of the type that has given rise to the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion is not new to American conservatism. The history of the conservative movement is in fact filled with doctrinal divisions and ideological quarrels, in many ways not unlike those found within international Communism. George H. Nash's seminal work, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (1976) makes clear the extent to which different factions of conservatism have sought throughout the movement's history, with varying degrees of success, to discredit, defeat, and then "expel" their rivals. But if previous disputes (or even other current ones, such as that between the neocons and the conservative realists) have been waged as legitimate battles of ideas, the same cannot be said for the current quarrel between neocons and paleocons, in which rhetorical excess has overshadowed any real debate. It may well be that with the paleoconservatives we are seeing the historical low point of debate inside intellectual conservatism. At the very least, it would be fair to say that the "Trotskyist neocon" assertion—historically inaccurate and intellectually sloppy, yet widely popular—is one of the major oddities of recent American intellectual life.

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