

War's preachers

By Robert Dreyfuss

tompaine.org | January 14, 2004

In their book, “An End to Evil”, Richard Perle and David Frum present us with a long To-Do List. And they seem like they’re in a hurry.

Iraq, of course – in their view at least – has already been checked off. Still to come: It’s time for the United States to “overthrow the terrorist mullahs of Iran”; force regime change in Syria by “interdict[ing]” Syria’s arms supply, cutting off its oil supply, and conducting “hot pursuit” raids into its territory; launch a “comprehensive air and naval blockade of North Korea” and plan a “preemptive strike against North Korea’s nuclear facilities”; and promote the dismantling of Saudi Arabia by supporting a breakaway Shi’ite minority state in that country’s eastern province, which just happens to be where the oil is.

And they don’t stop there. It’s also time to treat France as an “enemy,” to divide Europe, to “squeeze” China, to pull out of the United Nations, and, of course, on every neocon’s favorite wish list, crush once and for all the national aspirations of the Palestinians.

Wait, there’s more:

They also want to end “evil” at home, and they don’t mean domestic terrorists – they mean the evils of the CIA, the State Department, the FBI, the military, and the U.S. government at large. All of it, say Perle and Frum, is hopelessly mired in Old-Think, and badly wants a makeover. In a kind of Neocon Eye for the Government Guy, Perle and Frum tell us how.

The FBI? Junk it, they say, and reassign its counterterrorism units to a “new domestic intelligence agency” reporting to the Department of Homeland Security, with broad new powers (the Patriot Act was just a start), including power to hold noncitizen terrorist “suspects” without charges, so that the new agency can “squeeze information out of them,” not prosecute them.

The CIA? Fire CIA Director George Tenet – that’s a no-brainer for neoconservatives – strip the agency down to its analysts, and put all CIA and military covert operations teams into a “single paramilitary structure... answerable to the secretary of defense” for “wars...that must be waged in the shadows.” The State Department? Abolish the regional bureaus, especially Near Eastern Affairs (home of the dreaded “Arabists”), and fill the department with political appointees as officials and ambassadors who “will forcefully and

War's preachers | 2

unapologetically champion American policy abroad.”

Whew.

They don't give us a timetable for all this, but – since they consider the reelection of President Bush as the sine qua non of a neoconservative foreign policy – it's fair to say that it's a rough outline of what they'd like Bush's second term to look like.

Before elaborating, it's necessary to say a few words about the authors and the book itself. Perle and Frum are a kind of odd couple: Perle, a veteran of decades of political trench warfare, is the chief heir to Albert Wohlstetter, the godfather of the neocon defense strategists (he's married to Wohlstetter's daughter), making him a sort of an in-law Uday to Wohlstetter's Saddam. He's seen it all, knows where the bodies are buried, and his bulky frame exudes the sort of grizzled-veteran experience that comes with being a long-time Washington insider. Frum, on the other hand, is a boyish, baby-faced beginner, best known for a brief stint inside the Bush White House, where, as a speechwriter, he coined the phrase “axis of evil,” and he's since settled in as a writer for National Review. He's Stan to Perle's Ollie.

“An End to Evil” is less a book, really, than a 285-page screed, a kind of stream-of-consciousness rant, sans index and footnotes, filled with smirky bon mots, score-settling gotchas and ponderous denunciations of enemies at home and abroad. It's the policy-book analog to the current wave of popular political books written by Ann Coulter et al. on the right and Al Franken on the left: barb-studded, loaded with red meat and looking like it was written over a long weekend from some researcher's notes. (In Perle and Frum's case, one of their researchers was one Daniel Feith, presumably a scion of Perle's intimate friend Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy.) I actually read the whole thing – and my copy is filled with asterisks, heavy underlinings and exclamation points in the margins. If my reaction to the book was mildly apoplectic, it's precisely the reaction the book is intended to elicit among left-wingers; among those on the right, it's meant to engender a collective “Hoo-ah!”

But underneath it all is this: Perle and Frum are running scared. Despite their bravado, the Iraqi adventure is turning out to be an utter failure. Everything that Perle and Frum told us before the war turned out to be wrong. They said that Iraq was stuffed with weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam maintained close ties to Al Qaeda that U.S. forces would be welcomed in Baghdad with open arms, that Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress would be a popular leader – that the invasion of Iraq would transform of the Middle East. None of that turned out to be true.

And even Perle's claim that Iraq is now better off because of the U.S. invasion isn't so obvious; should Iraq plummet into civil war, pitting Kurdish warlords against Sunni sheikhs

War's preachers | 3

and fundamentalist Shi'ite mullahs, Iraq will be far worse off than it was under Saddam.

Having been responsible for the mess in Iraq, you'd think Perle, Frum & Co. would be a little gun shy. But no. On the theory, perhaps, that the best defense is a good offense, they propose their headlong prescription for Two, Three, Many Iraqs. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Perle, Frum and Co. are worried that America's appetite for a bullying foreign policy – and America's ability to stomach neoconservatism – may be wearing off.

Consider this: Perle has been laboring for years to win support for his version of a "muscular" foreign policy, to little avail. It's not only the left that has resisted him and his friends, it's the establishment – including the Council on Foreign Relations, the mainstream foreign policy thinktanks and, above all, the foreign affairs veterans at the State Department, the CIA and among the U.S. military.

Indeed, Perle and Frum's plan to "radically reorganize" the U.S. national security bureaucracy is explicitly aimed at defanging the critics of the neocons inside the establishment. Perle and Frum themselves admit, in the book, that they and their friends are a "tiny minority" against the "enormous majority in government who wish to continue to do things as they have always done." Because they are a noisy but influential minority, Perle, Frum et al. are often unfairly characterized as conspiratorial, they write. "It's no wonder that those few policy makers who have urged a strong policy against terror have been called a 'cabal.'"

In the book, Perle and Frum are at pains to dispel the "myth of the neoconservative cabal." Indeed, cabal may not be the right word. I prefer fraternity. There's no doubt that Perle and his allies inside and outside of government are a closely knit band who share a history, a worldview and a web of thinktanks, associations and journals that bind them together. For decades, they've almost reveled in their outsider status, seeing themselves (not entirely incorrectly) as a League of Extraordinary Gentlemen whose ideas never quite captured the public imagination. In my reporting on the Iraq policy, however, over the past 15 months, it's become clear to me that the neocons believe that 9/11 changed all that, and that the shock and trauma of the 2001 attacks caused America, and President Bush, to yearn for exactly the kind of muscle-bound foreign policy bullying that the neoconservatives have called for all these years.

It was, at last, their moment in the sun.

Now their fear is that the moment is wearing off. The impact of 9/11 is slowly dissipating. America may be coming to its senses. In a moment of utter shock, America pushed the panic button, and called for a foreign policy directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Now, we are all collectively coming out the matinee, rubbing our eyes in the sunlight, and realizing that this is not a movie. This is real life. And – what? – the

War's preachers | 4

neocons are running things? All of a sudden, it seems more and more likely that Perle's "tiny minority" could get the collective boot. That's infinitely more likely should Iraq's tottering accomplishment collapse into chaos, and if public concern that President Bush lied about Iraq's threat to the United States – its mythical ties to terrorism and WMD – becomes a major political issue in 2004.

In desperate moments, people lash out. Perhaps the clearest sign of Perle and Frum's desperation is their shameless effort to preempt their opponents attacks by claiming that anyone who criticizes them is an anti-Semite. In disparaging the "myth of the neoconservative cabal," Perle and Frum say that "the neoconservative myth offers Europeans and liberals a useful euphemism for expressing their hostility to Israel." It's a standard refrain for defenders of Israel's own excesses: if you dare to criticize Ariel Sharon's thuggish policy toward the occupied territories, the expansionist settler movement, the building of The Wall, etc., then you are *prima facie* anti-Semitic. In similar fashion, if you disagree with the Perle-Frum vision of an endless war on terror and preemptive regime-change wars, and if you excoriate the relatively small group of neocons partisans who advocate that policy, you hate Jews. (David Brooks, writing in *The New York Times* recently, went so far as to say that when critics use the word neocons, "neo" means Jewish!) Journalists around the world, Perle and Frum say, constantly ask them: "Is the war on terror a Zionist plot?" Well, no, it's not. But neither are Perle's critics anti-Semites.

Still, in gatherings at neocon thinktanks and in conversations with leading neoconservative strategists, it's common to hear it said, half-humorously, that not all neocons are Jewish, a fact that Newt Gingrich, Jim Woolsey and Jeanne Kirkpatrick can attest to.

Why so many neoconservatives are Jewish, however, is a fascinating topic for another article. The answer involves history, culture, politics and religion in equal measure. But in any case, though it is obvious that there is no justification for Perle and Frum to try to tar their critics (the vast majority of them, anyway) as anti-Semites, they do it anyway. Perhaps their fear is that, as neoconservatives, they have no real political constituency in the population at large: not among liberals, not among conservatives (some of whom are, in fact, anti-Semitic), and not even among Jews, among whom they are a small minority. In fact, few Jews are neocons, and most Jews vote Democratic.

In the end, Perle and Frum make the breathtaking argument that they are fighting for civilization itself, even if civilization doesn't appreciate it. "We are fighting on behalf of the civilized world," they write. "We will never cease to hope for the civilized world's support."

War's preachers | 5

Well. The civilized world may not be listening to Perle and Frum. The problem is, President Bush is. ●

Robert Dreyfuss is a freelance writer based in Alexandria, Virginia, who specializes in politics and national security issues. He is currently working on a book about America's policy toward political Islam over the past 30 years.