

INCEPTION, PEAK, DECLINE, AND DEATH OF NEOCONSERVATISM

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I. INCEPTION (1960s–1970s): The Intellectual Rebellion

Neoconservatism emerged in the United States during the late 1960s as a reaction against the perceived excesses of liberal social policies and the radicalism of the New Left. Disillusioned liberals, former leftists, and intellectual elites formed the backbone of this movement. Notable figures such as **Irving Kristol**, **Norman Podhoretz**, and **Daniel Patrick Moynihan** led the charge, using platforms like *The Public Interest* and *Commentary* to criticize liberalism's failings and articulate an alternative vision.

This new ideology was designed to counterbalance liberal dominance in academia, media, and cultural institutions, blending traditional conservative values with pragmatic acceptance of a limited welfare state and free-market capitalism. Foreign policy became a cornerstone, with neoconservatives advocating for an assertive U.S. role in promoting democracy worldwide. The movement was primarily theoretical, appealing to highly educated elites rather than the broader working-class base of classical conservatism.

The intellectual nature of neoconservatism, however, sowed the seeds of its eventual marginalization. By focusing on ideological debates among elites, the movement failed to connect with middle-class and blue-collar Americans, leaving a void in addressing their concerns.

II. PEAK (1980s–Early 2000s): Political Influence and Global Ambitions

The 1980s marked the zenith of neoconservatism's influence under the Reagan administration. Figures like **Jeane Kirkpatrick** and **Paul Wolfowitz** helped shape U.S. foreign policy, emphasizing the need to combat communism and spread democracy. The end of the Cold War appeared to vindicate their approach, further elevating the movement's status.

The early 2000s represented the apex of neoconservative power with the Bush administration, particularly during the George W. Bush presidency (2001–2009). The tragic events of September 11, 2001, allowed neoconservatives to dominate U.S. foreign policy, with key figures such as **Richard Perle**, **Elliott Abrams**, **Douglas Feith**, and **H. R. McMaster** championing interventionist strategies. McMaster, known for his intellectual rigor and advocacy for robust U.S. global leadership, brought a military strategist's perspective to the movement's goals of promoting democracy and countering authoritarian regimes.

Domestically, however, neoconservatism struggled to resonate. The movement's focus on abstract principles and foreign policy priorities often alienated average Americans, who were more concerned with economic stability and cultural issues.

III. DECLINE (Late 2000s–2016): Loss of Public Trust

The decline of neoconservatism began with the prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Initial optimism gave way to widespread disillusionment as these conflicts became quagmires, with immense costs in lives and resources. The premise of exporting democracy through military intervention faced growing criticism, both from the left and from traditional conservatives.

Figures like **Francis Fukuyama** defected from the movement, critiquing its overreliance on military solutions and the hubris of its global ambitions. Politicians such as **John McCain** and **Mitt Romney**,

aligned with neoconservative ideals, failed to galvanize popular support in their presidential campaigns, signaling the movement's diminishing appeal.

At the same time, the rise of populist and nationalist movements revealed a growing disconnect between neoconservative elites and the American electorate. The focus on elite discourse and global strategies left neoconservatives ill-prepared to address the economic and cultural anxieties of middle-class and blue-collar Americans, who felt increasingly alienated by globalization and cultural liberalism.

IV. DEATH (2016–Present): The Rise of Classical Conservatism

The 2016 election of Donald Trump marked the definitive end of neoconservatism as a significant political force. Trump's campaign, rooted in classical conservatism rephrased for modern times, resonated with the working class and middle America. His emphasis on economic nationalism, border security, and an "America First" foreign policy directly countered the interventionist and globalist ethos of neoconservatism.

Trump's administration systematically excluded neoconservative voices, signaling a sharp break from the Bush-era foreign policy consensus. Figures like **Liz Cheney**, who represented neoconservative ideals, found themselves marginalized within the Republican Party. The movement's intellectual roots, which once thrived in think tanks and academic circles, now lacked a political base or policy platform. Neoconservatism's failure to confront the left and liberal ideologies on cultural and economic fronts further contributed to its demise. By ceding ground in areas like education, neoconservatives allowed liberal ideologies to dominate these key battlegrounds, leaving conservatives to grapple with their long-term influence.

Trump's electoral success underscored the reemergence of classical conservatism, albeit updated for contemporary challenges. By addressing the concerns of ordinary Americans and rejecting neoconservative elitism, Trump's victory symbolized the movement's ultimate failure to adapt and resonate with the broader public.

Conclusion

Neoconservatism was a short-lived yet influential movement, rising to prominence as an intellectual alternative to classical conservatism and liberalism. Its theoretical nature, elite focus, and overemphasis on foreign policy ultimately alienated the broader electorate, paving the way for its decline. The rise of Donald Trump and the resurgence of classical conservatism marked the final chapter in neoconservatism's political relevance.

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