

ENGL101

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The Flow of an Ideology: Analyzing the Rise of Neoconservative Foreign Policy in the
Government, the Media and the Public

There may be no event as impactful in 21st century U.S. history as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda. Killing thousands of civilians, the coordinated airplane strikes comprised the largest terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil, leaving the entire country shaken and confused. One of the first places people turned to make sense of the senseless was the news. Yet, helping the public understand September 11 proved difficult for the media, as the study of terrorism was also fundamentally shaken by the attacks and the meaning of terrorism became difficult to identify. Terrorism scholar David Altheide observes the definition of the term terrorism grew after 9/11 from a mere strategy to “mean an idea, a lifestyle, and, ultimately, a condition of the world” (293).

President George W. Bush coined the phrase “war on terror,” and the U.S. eventually invaded Afghanistan and Iraq under an aggressive foreign policy strategy. This war on terror era can be seen as lasting all the way until the inauguration of President Barack Obama, who promptly dropped the term’s usage in his foreign policy rhetoric and adopted a more liberal foreign policy that transitioned away from neoconservatism. Yet despite this rhetorical and ideological pivot in foreign policy, by the time President Obama entered office neoconservatism already had a foothold and momentum as a political ideology worth considering for foreign policy situations (Vaisse 8).

Neoconservatism is a nationalist ideology that originated in the 1990s, rooted in the history of American exceptionalism, that advocates for aggressive assertions of U.S. political and

military power in strategic areas in order to promote democracy and liberalism (Rojecki; Monten). What has not been explored in great depth, and what I will undertake, is the extent to which the media facilitated the rising popularity of neoconservatism.

After the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, media coverage of terrorism harmfully acted as a conductor between the government and the public in promoting the foreign policy positions of the United States that were heavily rooted in neoconservative ideology. My argument traces the flow of neoconservative ideology as it evolved from an idea, to a government position, to a media agenda and finally to a popular attitude. First, I will establish how neoconservatism began and became the driving force behind the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda. From there, I will explore how the complicit relationship between the government and the media led to a submissive media environment that commonly embraced government stances on terrorism-related events, even when these stances distorted the truth. I will finally turn to the manner in which the media disseminated this neoconservative ideology through news reports to the general public, a decision which has brought about harmful and lasting cultural repercussions. While academia has studied each of these relationships individually to different degrees, my argument attempts to situate the relationships in relation to each other in order to create a more comprehensive theory on the potentially pervasive influence certain ideologies, in this instance neoconservatism, can have during times of societal crisis.

The ideology of neoconservatism that embedded itself in the Bush administration's foreign policy began in the 1990s. The founding group for this new wave of neoconservative foreign policy came from the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a think tank formed in 1992. According to the organization itself, PNAC is based on a few fundamental propositions that assert the belief that American leadership is good for both America and for the world. In the

words of Bill Kristol, who acted as Project Chairman for PNAC, the group believed “such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle” (qtd. in Miller 12). Another perspective on PNAC’s ultimate goal, from terrorism scholar David Altheide, was that they “drew up a blueprint for U.S. world domination” (293). According to Bill Kristol’s statement of purpose, the PNAC intended “through issue briefs, research papers, advocacy journalism, conferences and seminars,” to “rally support for a vigorous and principled policy of American international involvement” (Miller 12). Every ideology has a birth, and the conception of neoconservatism occurred with the formation of PNAC. Although the ideology rose in the 1990s, it did not find a way into official U.S. foreign policy positions until the second Bush administration, where it rapidly became the dominant foreign policy approach.

The Sept. 11 attacks created the necessity for decisive action to be taken by the Bush administration, and this need was neatly filled by neoconservative ideas on foreign policy. Andrew Rojecki directly calls the Bush administration’s foreign policy neoconservative, and it is easy to see how Rojecki can make such a claim (67). Bush’s administration was composed of people directly involved with PNAC, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Scooter Libby who served in several positions assisting the President and Vice President during Bush’s administration (Badie 282). Altheide asserts that PNAC was “very influential” in their efforts to change U.S. foreign policy, and through the assent of many members of the think tank to prominent seats in the Bush administration, neoconservative ideas now had “credible claim-makers” in the government (293-4). While strong supporters of neoconservative ideology were able to get significant positions within the government in regards to foreign policy decision-making, the Sept. 11 attacks provided the opportunity for a decisive and aggressive response to

be taken by the U.S. government. The national security strategy of the U.S. under Bush, referred to as the Bush Doctrine, laid out a foreign policy plan that was distinctively neoconservative. Jonathan Monten describes the Bush Doctrine as “an operationalization of neoconservatism” that held an “underlying neoconservative disposition” (141). Between the Bush administration being composed of former PNAC members and the necessity to act in an assertive manner – a characteristic inherent to neoconservatism – neoconservative foreign policy ideas were able to dominate the Bush administration and the U.S. government in the post-9/11 political environment.

Whereas the connection between neoconservatism and the government is direct, the flow of the ideology to the press may initially seem more tenuous. However, in reality, post-9/11 media coverage of terrorism was widely influenced by the government and neoconservatism. Altheide writes that the prominent neoconservatives in Bush’s administration were very successful in “promoting the major news frames and favorable news coverage about going to war with Iraq following the attacks of 9/11” (294). The most widely used news frame was framing U.S. interventionism in Iraq and Afghanistan as an essential part of the war on terror. One study analyzing op-eds from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that discussed the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan found that the op-eds widely echoed the government’s national security strategy and utilized this war on terror frame (Rojecki 81-82).

The complicity between the media and the government during the actual wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is also clear, and those affinities helped pressure the media to distort the truth and reality in their reports. War journalist and media analyst Dahr Jamail argues that major news coverage “blatantly abdicated its role of objective informer to the public” during the Iraq War (290). According to Jamail, the media was commonly pressured to follow the official

government lines and virtually always complied. For instance, in a 2007 series of helicopter strikes on Iraq, the U.S. government claimed the attacks killed 49 armed men and no civilians, while reports from Shi'ite groups and local Iraqi police directly contradicted the government's stance by observing dead women and children. The U.S. media exclusively reported the government's stance on the attack in the face of conflicting legitimate reports from other sources (298). Jamail concludes that the "western media tried to influence public opinion of the Iraq War by consistently tampering with truth and distorting reality" (300).

Another war journalist named Danny Schechter interpreted the Iraq war as composed of two wars fought by the Pentagon: one with soldiers and one with journalists. Schechter states that the government naturally tried to limit negative coverage and maximize reporting that would rally support back home. The government did this through common techniques such as censorship, self-censorship and spinning, but also through less common tactics such as calculated deception. It became commonplace for government and news reports to ignore civilian casualties and downplay the severity of Iraqi resistance. The effects on the media were far-reaching and pervasive. As an example, Schechter points to how MSNBC talk show host Phil Donahue was ordered to maintain a ratio of two pro-war guests for every critic he featured on his program (310). Schechter reasons that the media was "sacrificing truth in the service of a false sense of duty and patriotic correctness" (309). Regardless of the exact causation behind the media's compliance with the government, it is evident that this relationship led to untruthful reporting. The overt complicity between the media and the government led to one-sided coverage that misinformed the American public.

The nature of military stances the media complied with is of special importance, as the military's lines consistently strayed far away from the truth. Government lines were very

frequently warped to the point where Schechter suggests the government was guilty of using “weapons of mass deception” on the media (308). Evidence of deception in government reports is overwhelming, with one common example being control over the language used in skirmish reports. Altheide writes about how the media widely accepted military officials’ definitions of the enemy as “criminals” and “thugs” in coverage. Iraqi fighters were not called “armies” or “soldiers” by the media, but rather “gunmen” or “insurgents.” This difference in terminology delegitimized the Iraqi side and was directly adopted by the media (Altheide 289-290). Altheide also discusses how the government controlled the language that was used for reporting on military altercations, a common propaganda task. The “fallen soldiers” diction for US soldiers made the deaths of American soldiers more heroic. By banning photographs of the *fallen*, the government exerted a high level of control over what the media reported when it came to deaths, according to Altheide (290-1). Due to the high level of control the government had over the media and the media’s acquiescence in going along with the government, coverage distanced itself from truth and reality. Instead, coverage’s proclivity was to “suggest a clear narrative in which an intolerant Islam is identified in opposition to Western liberal values,” according to media scholar Justin Lewis, a pattern that directly corresponds with the neoconservative foreign policy of the U.S. government (268).

The final step in this build-up of neoconservative ideology is from the media to the public. One of the most compelling pieces of research on the effect of the media’s neoconservative framing of stories involving international relations comes from terrorism scholar Kimberly Powell. Powell scrutinized the media’s coverage of the 11 attempted terrorist attacks in the U.S. post-9/11 and found pervasive trends. Her research found a stark dichotomy between the media’s treatment of domestic and international terrorists that emphasized and exacerbated the

cultural and religious differences found in international terrorists (91). Powell's study concluded that the trend for domestic terrorists, after they are found to be U.S. citizens, is for them to be given human descriptors, have plausible reasons for their act speculated about, only to reach a conclusion that the attack was an isolated incident with no imminent future threat (91).

International terrorists, as Powell points out, face radically different thematic coverage once found to be Muslim. Media reports will tend to link them, or speculate a link, to a larger terrorist organization such as al-Qaeda, proceed to connect their act to the broader war on America by Islam, and finally conclude that the future threat from Islam is enhanced by their act (97).

Powell interprets her findings as evidence that the media helped breed a cultural fear of Islam in the United States and widen the divide between the two cultures. Her research narrows the media's impact on promoting fear in public to a specific fear of Muslims and Islam known as Islamophobia (106). The aforementioned cultural focus the neoconservative government put on Eastern culture coupled with how the media went along with the government's stance had distinctly negative cultural consequences among the American public as shown by Powell's work. By "demonizing Muslims and humanizing Christians," the media not only worsened the divide between Eastern and Western cultures, but threatened cultural and religious tolerance in U.S. culture (107). Powell concludes that this harmful media coverage of terrorism left Muslim Americans "no longer free to practice and to name their religion without fear of prosecution, judgment, or connection to terrorism" (107). Through the dichotomized nature of media coverage of terrorism, Middle Eastern culture became further ostracized and demonized in American society and culture.

To come full circle, one piece of academic research found that the media's usage of "threatening information and evocative imagery" in news reports, a common characteristic of

terrorism coverage, increased public support for the Bush administration among the U.S. public, and in effect support for neoconservatism (Gadarian 469). Shana Kushner Gadarian published her findings on the prevalence and impact of evocative imagery in a 2010 *Journal of Politics* article. Gadarian theorized that the media influenced public attitudes on foreign policy by enhancing feelings of vulnerability and fear (472). Her study focused on the impact evocative imagery had on its readers through a controlled, randomized experiment. She found that “citizens form significantly different foreign policy views when the information environment is emotionally powerful...even when the factual information is exactly the same” (469). Gadarian also concluded that an increase in “media consumption in combination with heightened threat will increase support for hawkish foreign policy” (472). Gadarian’s work sets the stage for the argument that public support for hawkish foreign policy may stem not from terrorist attacks themselves, but rather from a sensationalistic media environment that caused the public to feel threatened. Finally, Gadarian’s broadest conclusion suggests how the public can support a war they wouldn’t otherwise support “if the media can activate citizens’ sense of impending danger” (481). When put in context with the post-9/11 media environment where evocative imagery was the norm instead of the exception, Gadarian’s research demonstrates the importance and potential impact the nature of media coverage can have on the public’s attitude towards foreign policy.

The war on terror era provides an interesting case study of how an ideology can flow from an influential yet small group of people through the government and media to influence the minds of the mass public. In the case of the war on terror, neoconservatism has caused and still causes increased intolerance for Eastern culture and Islam among U.S. citizens. Hopefully, this paper helps forward the conversation about media coverage of terrorism to a more useful debate

that focuses not on finger pointing, but rather on how each step in the exchange of information can better protect an audience from unintentionally adopting and/or supporting a potentially harmful ideology in the future. Although the War on Terror era ended with Barack Obama's first tenure as president, dealing with all of the ancillary and interconnected issues within terrorism remains an ongoing concern. Particularly with the rise of ISIS, and a recent increase in U.S. involvement in the Middle East, it is essential that journalism not only recognizes but learns from previous mistakes in coverage. The media is supposed to be an independent and objective watchdog of a democracy. New ideas can, and should, be able to flow into the government, but when the ideas widely influence the media, in effect influencing the public's opinions, the benefits of living in a democracy decrease. Without confronting their problematic past treatments of the War on Terror era, the media is bound to repeat the same mistakes and continue the negative cultural consequences caused by media coverage in the past. American society needs a truly independent media, not the illusion of one.

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