

The Neocons: Who They Are

Guest: Daniel McCarthy

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WOODS: Let's talk about the neoconservatives in terms of past, present, and future: where they came from, what they're up to now, and where they're going. So first of all, who are these people? Is there a specific set of beliefs that they have? Do they come from a particular tradition? Who the heck are they?

McCARTHY: There's kind of genealogy of them on the one hand, and there's also a few attitudes that are sometimes associated with specific policies that tend to distinguish them. They're almost always extremely hawkish. That's a defining characteristic. While there are other hawkish right-wingers, the neocons are sort of unusual in that respect. In terms of their genealogy, they're interesting, because most of their origins are on the Left. In some cases, actually, a few of the key ones, such as Irving Kristol and Joshua Muravchik, started out as members of the Young People's Socialist League at City College in New York. But others had never actually had a sort of socialist or Trotskyist background. They had been on the Left during the 1960s, and it's over the course of the last 40 years or so that they've come to identify themselves more as Republicans and more as people on the Right.

WOODS: Today are the neocons still in the saddle? Do you feel like they've had any setbacks? Was Syria a setback, or was that just something minor? Was that an aberration that we're going to forget about a year from now?

McCARTHY: I think Syria was a disappointment to them more than a setback. The neocons' power is behind the scenes. It lies in the institutions that control the philanthropies and fundraising tools that they have and also the media presence. Our refusal to go to war in Syria didn't deprive the neocons of any of those weapons. But it did disappoint them, because, as I say, they tend to be very hawkish. They love the idea of the empire in the abstract as much as they are committed to specific policies either for the U.S. or for Israel.

WOODS: There are some neocons, like Bill Kristol, for example, who clearly do not believe in limited government in any reasonable sense of that term. But on the other hand, you have a guy like Mark Levin. Those of you listening to this program know I'm by no means a particular fan of Mark Levin—he's had choice words for me, and I've had arguments for him. The thing is, although some people call him a neocon, but he does seem to believe in limited government in a lot of ways (with the notable exception of foreign policy). So is Fred Barnes a neocon and John McCain and Mark Levin, even though they can't stand each other? John McCain and Mark Levin don't like each other. How do we make sense of all this? Are they all neocons?

McCARTHY: It's hard to distinguish, because the neocons have been so influential on the Right in general both the Republican Party, talk radio, institutions, magazines, etc., that even things that don't start out as being explicitly neoconservative wind up having a certain neoconservative tendency or coloration to them. So Mark Levin might not actually be a neocon per se, but he's someone who's clearly very influential, especially with foreign policy. The neocons themselves, their domestic policy takes a backseat to their hawkishness, especially today. In domestic policy, their preference tends to be rather moderate. They are not enemies of big government. They're not enemies really of almost any kind of government power in principle. But in practice they sometimes favor more or less degrees of particular programs. So it's very hard to define in terms of domestic policy. But in terms of foreign policy, they tend to be very hawkish. They tend to have a sense of America as being the little kid who's being bullied on the block—a very strange view, because America is by far the most powerful country in the world. But that really I think is one of the defining neoconservative attitudes towards world affairs.

WOODS: Did you see that article maybe a month or two ago in the *Washington Times* in which Newt Gingrich is revealed to supposedly be having second thoughts about some of the neoconservative foreign-policy ventures simply on pragmatic grounds? They haven't had the results that were hoped for, and in some cases have had just downright counterproductive results. I guess we can't know the man's soul. Is it genuine soul-searching or is this a result of the fact that the Rand Paul bandwagon seems to be growing substantially, and Gingrich is putting his finger in the wind to see which way it's blowing? How did you take that?

McCARTHY: I had independently heard that Gingrich was having those kinds of second thoughts, and my own very brief encounters with Gingrich have shown me that he is someone who reads books and who does try to think. His predispositions are not reliable as far as I'm concerned, and certainly you know his policy preferences in general have been very, very detrimental, but no, I think he actually realizes both the Republican Party has been taken to a very dangerous and counterproductive place by neoconservatives in terms of the foreign policy they've imposed on it. I think he simply wants an escape, and he's willing to look at whatever options might be open to him. I think a lot of other Republicans feel the same way. They're not committed to one particular vision of foreign policy or another. They simply realize that what we've seen in our last decade has been disastrous for them on a purely practical level.

WOODS: Gingrich, Kristol, the other big names we associate with neoconservatism, they have one thing in common today: they're over age 60. So there's a generational issue at work here as well. On the other hand, there are apparently *some* young neocons. I went to CPAC for several years. I didn't think they existed. I didn't think there were any people, much less young people, who would drop what they were doing so they could go watch just a video screen of a Mitt Romney speech, and yet there were such people. Is there strength among young people in neoconservatism and if so, where's that coming from? What are the institutions that are forming it?

McCARTHY: They're not particularly strong with young people, although your experience at CPAC shows that there are people who just for purely political, tribal reasons identify with the Republican Party so strongly that they'll have a kind of admiration for someone like Mitt Romney, a figure who otherwise would generate no enthusiasm whatsoever. That's kind of a partisan Pavlovian reflex. The neocons, because they exert so much influence on the Republican Party and the conservative movement, are able to get some young people sort of by proxy through that mechanism. But in terms of the kind of young people who will shape the future, the leaders, the thinkers, the writers, the people who are most energetic about getting things done, it seems to me that the neocons are very weak there and that their philosophy is not gaining converts. But that's not to say that there's no one. They do have outlets such as the Washington Free Beacon, for example, a website with a great many young people working for it. That's a website that was actually started by William Kristol's son-in-law. The neocons do have the next generation, but it doesn't seem to be a generation that has the kind of intellectual resources or intellectual capital that the forefathers had.

WOODS: Right. You can imagine reading something by Irving Kristol, let's say, and not thinking right away that it's the most preposterous thing you've ever read. Yet I find that when I do come across young neocons—I don't know, whether in *Human Events* or wherever they manage to get published—it could just be my own prejudices, but I'm distinctly unimpressed. They don't seem to be particularly widely read. They don't seem to aspire to be widely read. It's almost as if they aspire simply to a part of the machine, because the machine certainly doesn't reward people who are widely read.

Let me throw out a specific name to you, and I want to get your immediate response, like word association. The name is Ted Cruz. Tell me what you think about Ted Cruz.

McCARTHY: I think Ted Cruz is the bridge or the lynchpin that links neoconservatism with the grassroots Tea Party and even with certain kinds of libertarianism, that they want to project onto Republican politicians

something that isn't there. So Cruz, I don't know the man personally. I don't know where he's coming from necessarily. But I do know that he hasn't really done anything that has broken the mold for Republican thinking about any issues, let alone something like national security or foreign policy, the way that Ron Paul certainly did and Rand Paul has as well, or for that matter Justin Amash in the House of Representatives. So Cruz is someone who seems to take the existing Republican set of attitudes and amplify them. He amplifies them, and he preaches them in a very articulate way, which I think is appealing to young people and to voters all across the country, but I don't see the message itself is all that different from what we were getting during the Bush era.

WOODS: I thought, when we had that confirmation dispute over...I'm blanking on the name.

McCARTHY: Chuck Hagel.

WOODS: Chuck Hagel, right. When that dispute was going on, I thought he conducted himself like a propagandist, and I felt completely vindicated. Because from the beginning, I thought there's no way this guy can be a foreign-policy noninterventionist and have endorsed Rick Perry for president. I couldn't understand the enthusiasm for him among so many people. Yet you typically see him lumped together in a group of people we're told are the good guys in the Senate: there are Mike Lee, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul. What do you think about that troika? Do you think there's something to that, that they are some kind of a bloc, and so if so, how does Rand Paul fit into that bloc?

McCARTHY: They are and they aren't a bloc. They've all been elected fairly recently, since 2010, and they all are willing to fight the growth of government. They've supported one another in various filibusters. So I do think there is a linkage there. But I think each of them also has a distinct point of departure with their philosophy. With Rand Paul, I think it's very clearly a very strong element of his father's philosophy and also a practical element that's also reexamined thinkers like George Kennan, for example, on foreign policy. So Rand Paul is someone who's very creative, and he takes a libertarian base. He turns it into something new and something that may have very good prospects in the future. Ted Cruz, I think again he's much more of a conventional Republican in the mold that we've seen in the past. I think he's someone who may be comparable to Jim DeMint, for example. So he may be very strong when it comes to limited-government issues, but I have doubts about him when it comes to the more difficult matters.

Republicans tend to shy away from having any kind of anti-neocon views, especially when it comes to the national security state or warfare. But even there I should point out what Cruz said during the Hagel nomination hearings, in which Hagel was being attacked. Hagel had actually voted for the Iraq war in 2003, but he didn't support the surge in 2006. People on the Republican hawkish Right thought Hagel was a dove, that he wasn't sufficiently militaristic. That was the main contention on the Hagel hearings, and Cruz joined in on the criticisms of Hagel. But even then Cruz did back off a little bit and say that he thought of himself as being less aggressive in terms of foreign policy than some of his other colleagues who were criticizing Hagel. So even Cruz is aware that this is not something that he wants to embrace wholeheartedly. He's not John McCain. But I do have doubts about him.

I think Mike Lee is yet another thing, because he's clearly someone who comes from a constitutionalist conservative background, and doesn't have the libertarian theory that I think is behind some of Rand Paul's thinking, but clearly does have its own sort of serious faces as well. Lee's been doing a lot of work trying to craft a pro-family policy with tax cuts, for example, that he melded together with constitutionalist conservative and views of limited government. So I think each of those three individuals is actually very interesting and very distinct from the others, even though they wind up cooperating quite a lot.

WOODS: Dan, I'm going to read you something. I want you to comment on it. I want you to expand on it. "The conservative movement as we've known it until now is dying. It has powerful money-making scams but no brain, no direction, and very little relevance to the economic, strategic, and cultural questions that

matter today.” I’ll preserve the anonymity of the author of this quotation unless you’d like to spill the beans. Say more about that, because I find that intriguing.

McCARTHY: For your listeners’ benefit, that was something I wrote to Tom just earlier this afternoon.

WOODS: So I didn’t know for sure if I was supposed to quote that or not.

McCARTHY: I’m happy to own up to it. I’ve said similar things in public. The conservative movement as it exists now is something that was developed during the Cold War really to push a more military approach to the Cold War. It has other elements. It has social conservatives and others who have clearly different priorities, but the whole infrastructure, the whole backbone and central hub, is something that was built to address a certain set of conditions that existed during the Cold War, and not only during the height of the Cold War, during its early days, but even during the later part. Because after Vietnam and after Nixon went to China, a lot of people on the Right, and also people who were sort of proto-neocons in the Democratic Party, became very alarmed at what they saw as *détente*, and a general sort of demilitarization of the Cold War. You had this new sort of alignment of hawks that started to cluster and roost in the old conservative movement from the Cold War, and that gave it a new lease on life. That lease on life was then renewed yet again in 2001 when you had the 9/11 attacks. So this entity has been around in one form or another for about 60 years.

At this point I think it’s outlived its usefulness. It’s something that can still generate a lot of television viewers and talk-radio listeners. It gets a lot of donor dollars, because there’s a perfected formula for going after middle-aged and elderly white Americans and getting their money and getting their attention. In terms of addressing what Americans under the age of 40 or so are most concerned about I just don’t see it. You don’t see this conservative movement ahead of the curve when it comes to questions like what do we think about the Federal Reserve? What do we think about America’s role in the world if we don’t want to be an empire, which Americans clearly do want to be? They’ve voiced that concern in several elections in the past five years. So the conservative movement doesn’t address these questions. Instead it’s still fighting as if the question is whether we’re going to elect Ronald Reagan in 1980 whether or not our stance toward the Soviet Union is hard enough.

WOODS: That naturally leads to the question about the conservative movement and about neoconservatism in particular. They’ve got to change in some way; their demographic is dying. Somebody found an interesting statistic about the demographics of people who like Ron Paul on Facebook and those who like Rand Paul, and the Rand Paul likers are much older. I suspect that’s going to be all the more true for people who are just out-and-out neocons. How do you anticipate they’re going to try to adjust to what is clearly a changing electorate? They’re not just going to go down with the ship. Power is the most important thing in the world to them. How do they change in a way that doesn’t compromise what they really want to do but puts a different gloss on it?

McCARTHY: They’ve done it before. In the 1980s and the 1990s and really into the George W. Bush administration, neocons who started off being rather skeptical or critical of social conservatism or wanted to keep it at arm’s length. They considered it somewhat uncouth. They became closer and closer to the Religious Right, basically. They found a way to build bridges, and at this point in terms of social policy, the neocons and the Religious Right are more or less indistinguishable. There were some exceptions. Someone like John Podhoretz, for example, has *Commentary*, has a more progressive view of various social policies than many of the other neocons. The neocons keep most of that pretty quiet, and they work very closely now with a lot of Religious Right leaders. I think their next step is to try to build similar bridges with the Tea Party and with certain kinds of libertarians. Again what the neocons are most interested in is this kind of Manichaeism worldview, this clash of good and evil to be fought by actual arms by the United States in the world. They’re perfectly willing to adjust their domestic policy on whatever issue it might be if that’s necessary in order to gain power and to perform the ritual, as it were, in terms of fighting the last battle of

good and evil in the world.

WOODS: Dan, this may be a heresy among some libertarians, but I have a lot of sympathy for conservatism. In questions that are not directly political I still think of myself as a conservative. I don't use the word, because unfortunately it brings up all these unfortunate associations. I don't want people to think I'm Ted Cruz or any of those sorts of people. When I try to explain to people that there used to be a more humane, more intellectual, more civilized conservatism, people don't believe me, because it looks like there are only like five or six such people. What you're doing over at *The American Conservative* magazine is helping to buttress my case so I don't seem so implausible when I claim that there is conservatism other than Rush Limbaugh. Why don't you take the closing one or two minutes to explain to people what the mission is that you guys are up to over at *The American Conservative* magazine.

McCARTHY: *The American Conservative* is both a print magazine and also a website; the URL is www.theamericanconservative.com. We started back in 2002 to show that there was another side of conservatism. Not just what George W. Bush was pushing. George W. Bush of course favored the Iraq war. He was the driving force of that, and *The American Conservative* basically said this is completely wrong. This is wrong not only on a moral level. This is not only wrong on a strategic level, it's even wrong in terms of what conservatives actually stand for. Conservatism as what we understand it and as in fact it was historically understood before you had this kind of movement that was fighting the Cold War. The historic conservatism has more of a Burkean element to it. It's thoughtful. It doesn't like sudden change. It's very skeptical of any kind of ideology that wants to transform the actual lives of people to fit some sort of ideal pattern.

That's true across the board. That's true whether it's communists trying to do it or whether it's neoconservatives or anyone else. So conservatism, I think, has this depth and this sense of taking things very cautiously and judiciously that gets totally lost in so many other walks of life today. *The American Conservative* tries to bring that back. We certainly believe very strongly in federalism. We believe very strongly in localism. Very much we are about this idea that if self-government means anything at all, it means self-government within a constrained context. It doesn't mean being one vote out of 300 million in a continental power. It's not something that can be distilled into a sound bite, because it really is about taking so many of these ideological assumptions that people have been programmed to believe and deconstructing them and looking more seriously at our actual lives and our practices and what's wholesome about them, what's necessary to preserve those things.