
REVIEW ESSAY

The Transparent Cabal

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The word *cabal* is derived from the Hebrew word *Kabbalah*, meaning “received doctrine.” Modern usage of *cabal* denotes a secretive group with mystical power and often insidious influence. For the past decade, in U.S. foreign policy the word has been associated specifically with neoconservatism and in particular with a narrow group of pro-Israeli neoconservatives with occupations in government, think tanks, academia, and the news media.

A true cabal is opaque and mysterious, not transparent. Yet Stephen Sniegoski has aptly and refreshingly titled his latest book *The Transparent Cabal* (Norfolk, Va.: Enigma Editions, 2008). The individuals who most convincingly articulated a need for war in Iraq and who strategized a U.S. mission to replace the Iraqi and other governments in the Middle East at gunpoint did not keep their vision veiled. Instead, they loudly trumpeted, persistently drummed, and publicly paraded it in the offices, conferences, and reading rooms of the American political elite for many years. Sniegoski relies on publicly accessible material to introduce and support his thesis, which is that a close relationship exists between U.S. neoconservatives and the Israeli Likudnik right and that neoconservatives view U.S. foreign-policy interests through the lens of Israeli interests as perceived by the right-wing parties influential in Israel’s own democracy (pp. 3–7).

The idea that American neoconservatives have conflated U.S. security interests in the Middle East with the international-security perspective of ardent right-wingers in Israel has generated inflammatory and angry reactions from pro-Israel quarters in Washington. It is academically and politically a dangerous contemplation, as Sniegoski recognizes and as analysts of recent U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East know. The

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brief and heavily footnoted assessment entitled “The Israel Lobby,” by respected realists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (*London Review of Books*, March 23, 2006), not only was initially denied a U.S. publisher in 2006, but also gave rise to a sustained and somewhat hysterical smear campaign against both authors, replete with public accusations of anti-Semitism and calls for their removal from both academia and public life. Far from a polemic, “The Israel Lobby” is a benign and politically dry review of the actions and impact of the various organizations that actively promote Israel’s interests in Washington, including the Likud-leaning American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations.

Mearsheimer and Walt’s report on the power that American advocates for Israel exert in shaping policy and increasing financial, military, and moral support for Israel reads much like any of the expository speeches given at the annual AIPAC policy conference held each spring in Washington. The difference, of course, is one of perspective. Rather than self-congratulatory and self-promoting, Sniegowski’s perspective, like that of other critics of modern Israel-centric influence in U.S. foreign-policy making, leans to U.S. constitutionalism and traditional ideas of U.S. democracy.

The Transparent Cabal is not a direct inquiry into the controversial role of the “Israel Lobby.” Instead, Sniegowski specifically examines the rationale for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq; the sustaining philosophies of American neoconservatives; their role in “selling” the war to the American people, Congress, and the administration; and the degree of linkage between the neoconservatives themselves and the Likud Party and political Zionism. To carry out this examination, Sniegowski takes the reader on an eye-opening excursion into the history of neoconservatism in U.S. politics, exploring the evolution of security philosophy in Israel during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In tracking the political and academic evolution of neoconservatism, the author revisits the plethora of public statements, advocacy letters, and campaigns, as well as the numerous articles and books written by key U.S. neoconservatives, including Irving and William Kristol, Norman and John Podhoretz, Michael Ledeen, David Frum, and Richard Perle. More significant, and perhaps for the first time in a mainstream U.S. research report, Sniegowski also tracks what was going on contemporaneously in Israeli politics and security strategy. This aspect of *The Transparent Cabal* is the most fascinating and represents the author’s most significant contribution to the history of U.S. policy in the Middle East. With a degree of detail not found elsewhere, Sniegowski reviews the infamous 1996 “Clean Break” document written by prominent American neoconservative Jews for Israeli politician and present-day Israeli prime minister Bibi Netanyahu. He also explains how the disruption and destruction of Arab states, scattering them into sectarian and ethnic “statelets,” can be seen—and has been seen for decades by Likud and other right-wing Zionist parties in Israel—as good for Israel’s security (pp. 45–56). This unemotional, fact-based, and heavily footnoted analysis is particularly useful for students of foreign policy because it places the well-known U.S. neoconservative language of Middle

East strategy and objectives in relief against equally well-publicized but far less familiar Likud language regarding Israeli security.

Beyond the contextual comparison, *The Transparent Cabal* closely tracks the political and rhetorical history of the George W. Bush administration's 2002–2003 promotion of the need to invade Iraq. Sniegowski systematically explains the neoconservative push for regime change that had been voiced and promoted since the early 1980s, throughout the Iraq-Iran War. Inasmuch as the United States overtly backed Saddam Hussein during this conflict, an effort to weaken Iraq was not national policy; as Henry Kissinger infamously observed, “It’s a pity they both can’t lose.” At that time, Washington viewed secular Iraq under Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship as a bastion against radical anti-American Shi’ism fermenting in Iran. Israel took Iran’s side and opposed Iraq, seeing Saddam’s Baath nationalism and industrialization as a greater security threat than the backward mullahs farther east, and worked militarily and economically to assist Tehran. Sniegowski reminds us that the same neoconservatives who today demonize Iran and advocate U.S.-led destruction of Iran’s economy and government were appeasers of Iran’s mullahs in the middle to late 1980s. He notes that the names of many neoconservatives employed by or close to George H. W. Bush’s administration, including Michael Ledeen and Eliot Abrams, were already vaguely familiar to Americans who recalled the embarrassing and hypocritical Iran-Contra scandal during the Reagan administration.

When the Iran-Iraq War ended, the United States continued a diplomatic relationship with heavily indebted and economically devastated Iraq, to the extent that U.S. ambassador April Glaspie clearly indicated to Saddam Hussein that Washington would consider any action he took against Kuwait regarding possible slant drilling and economic gamesmanship over oil production as an internal matter. Sniegowski reminds us that neoconservative and pro-Israeli groups wrote and advocated in favor of a military response and that the Persian Gulf War was successfully promoted in the media and operationally successful, up to a point. In this examination of U.S. policy history, he reminds us of the many falsehoods (and their sources) leveraged by advocates of the 1990s war, including notoriously false congressional testimony and the use of doctored imagery within government channels used to convince the House of Saud to allow U.S. military basing in Saudi Arabia (p. 69).

Falsified evidence, imaginative and oft-repeated reports of atrocities, and coordinated government and media storytelling are typical fare in research for wars of choice, whether a country is led by a king, a prime minister, a parliament, or a popularly elected and constitutionally constrained president. We study the public justifications for the Spanish-American War, the one-sided reporting of the sinking of the *Lusitania* designed to bring the United States into World War I, the Roosevelt administration’s political agitation to join World War II and political foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and of course Nixon’s unitary executive-style expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia and Laos. None of these examples involved neoconservatism, yet all U.S. wars in the past century

have been guided by forms of Wilsonian idealism, the muscular version of which is directly associated with neoconservatism. Ideas do matter, and language often matters even more. Sniegowski's thoughtful and calm analysis helps reveal both the ideological and the value-laden semantic roles played by political advocates for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and other U.S. military activities throughout the Middle East.

Absent the threat of global communism, U.S. wars of choice in the Middle East have remained a hard sell for most Americans, and such wars have no substantial domestic economic or political interest to push for them. Some evidence indicates a cohesive advocacy of Middle Eastern wars within the oil industry (leverage and access), by the military-industrial complex (consumption and growth), and among some sectors of American fundamentalist, millennial, and Zionist forms of Christianity. Sniegowski assesses each of these potential centers of domestic advocacy and finds them lacking. Here students of the 2003 invasion of Iraq may look askance, in part because of the body of work that explores structural imperatives for the invasion, including William Clark's *Petrodollar Warfare* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society, 2005), Eugene Jarecki's *The American Way of War* (New York: Free Press, 2008), and Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

As many observers and analysts across the political spectrum have noted, the attacks of September 11, 2001, unified a large part of the U.S. populace (and, according to Sniegowski, steeled the resolve of a previously ambling and directionless George W. Bush). The "war on terror" justification accurately explained the popularity of U.S. vengeance on Afghanistan's Taliban. Better than most analysts, Sniegowski explains not only why, but how the false linkage of 9/11 to Saddam Hussein and others was launched and promoted, and how popular American belief in that false linkage lasted just long enough to allow the destruction of Iraq as a single powerful Arab state (pp. 221–22). This revelation is both timely and of particular interest as Americans begin to come to terms with the role and aims of the Bush administration's treatment and torture of Muslim detainees in 2001 and 2002. Overall, the lack of a popular American constituency for Middle Eastern meddling remains a longstanding problem for neoconservatism in America—and perhaps this condition makes more understandable the tendency toward knee-jerk accusations of anti-Semitism whenever the neoconservative-Likudnik axis is discussed.

Sniegowski has produced a clear, straightforward, and extraordinarily well-documented text that should be welcomed by historians, politicians, and taxpayers on both neoconservative and nonneoconservative sides of the aisle. He accurately portrays American Jewry, with frequent and well-documented references to the overwhelming majority of U.S. Jews who do not support the Israeli political right and who prefer peaceful, noncoercive, and market-based solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The bulk of the antiwar effort today is led and informed by Jews, and Jewish representation in and support of movements for peace, justice, human rights, responsible government, and honest media are significant. Sniegowski's assessment of the "transparent cabal" is told largely in the words of prominent

neoconservatives themselves, men not known for their religious fervor or ethnicity, but for their political inclination, which is increasingly out of step with that of most Americans today.

This group of politically and media connected ideologues was instrumental in ensuring that the United States toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. It may also be fairly credited with the chaos and calamity experienced by Iraqis, U.S. soldiers, and the region in the ongoing aftermath of that invasion. Might the outcome have been different? Sniegowski significantly points out that the traditional foreign-policy elite—perhaps a far less transparent cabal—was aware of and in opposition to the neoconservative propaganda and to the eventual U.S. policy informed by that propaganda. Among the hundreds of interesting quotes the author gives by leading neoconservatives is Richard Perle's observation that "[i]f Bush had staffed his administration with a group of people selected by Brent Scowcroft and Jim Baker, which might well have happened, then it could have been different" (p. 115).

It was, however, not different, and to understand the often confused and undeniably expensive reality of U.S. policy in the Middle East, one must understand the neoconservatives' thinking and political history. Stephen Sniegowski has provided a thoroughly researched and unemotional, yet fascinating and fast-paced analysis, and he effectively supports his thesis. In doing so, he has clearly raised both the level and the quality of debate about neoconservatism in the United States. This book should become foundational reading in academic and research circles, enlightening students about how foreign-policy decisions may be made in a massive warfare-oriented yet ostensibly popularly ruled state. In an era when congressional representatives worry about widespread constituent perceptions that they are foreign-policy rubes and when they backpedal to remember which administration fibs they were told and when, the time is right for *The Transparent Cabal* to be read and discussed by members of the U.S. political and media elite as well as by those who wish to hold them accountable.