

Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 303 pp.

Published in 2005 at the start of George W. Bush's second term, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* offers a chronological narrative of American Jewish involvement in U.S. conservative politics of the 20th century and seeks to redress the liberal bias in the historiography of American Jewish politics. Its author, Murray Friedman (1926–2005), the founder and director of the Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, shared a biography similar to that of many of the subjects in his book. After a period of youthful left-wing affiliations, Friedman became disillusioned with Communism—crediting Whittaker Chambers and Arthur Koestler for his change of views—and later served in the Reagan administration as vice chair of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. His views were adumbrated in an important volume of *American Jewish History* (1999) that he edited, and his essay there, “Opening the Discussion of Jewish Political Conservatism,” is in many ways more analytic than this posthumous work.

*The Neoconservative Revolution* opens with a description of how Americanizing Jews in the pre-Second World War era sought to create a “neutral society” (to use Jacob Katz's term) by insisting on an impenetrable separation of church and state, as well as focusing on civil rights and laying the foundation for the Jewish liberal mystique. Yet as Friedman illustrates in his second chapter, “The Premature Jewish Neoconservatives,” the participation of a group of young Jewish men (the “New York intellectuals”) in the American military caused them to experience the justness of American power in the defeat of Nazism. Although individuals such as Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Milton Himmelfarb, Elliot Cohen, and Irving Kristol remained in the liberal camp in the immediate postwar era, their earlier disillusionment with Stalinism laid the foundation for their ideological rapprochement with conservative trends in American politics.

Chapter 3 seeks to uncover the “forgotten Jewish godfathers” of neoconservatism, including Eugene Lyons, Ralph de Toledano, Morrie Ryskind, Frank Chodorov, Milton Friedman, Frank S. Meyer, and one godmother, Ayn Rand (née Alissa Rosenbaum), in an effort to prove that not all Jews were liberals in the 1950s and 1960s. But this chapter, as is true of most of the book, never analyzes why the Jewishness of these individuals mattered. Earlier, Friedman credited a vague “proclivity toward intellectualism” (p. 8) as the glue defining the group. In this chapter, he concedes

that the “religious and Jewish identity views of these Jewish conservatives widely differed” (p. 56). The issue of what, apart from origins, makes neoconservatism a Jewish phenomenon is never addressed or resolved, which makes its use as a coherent analysis of the phenomenon very limited.

Friedman goes on to tell the story of the contentious 1950s, marked by a parting of the ways among a group of left-wing anti-Stalinists of Jewish origin, and the emergence of *Commentary* and *The Public Interest* as organs of the New York intellectuals’ rightward shift. This story is well known. Chapter 5, “The Modernization of American Conservatism,” the book’s most original chapter, focuses on the very visibly Roman Catholic William F. Buckley, who moved American conservatism away from its bigoted (read: antisemitic) past, and popularized it through a magazine, *National Review*, and, most importantly, a television program, *Firing Line*, which first aired in 1966. This chapter illustrates how Buckley’s explicit rejection of religion as a ticket for admission into conservative American public policy made room for Jews. The significance of Buckley for Friedman’s story makes the “Jewish intellectuals” in his book’s subtitle glaringly dissonant. So, too, the space spent on Barry Goldwater, whose Jewish roots could only be traced to his paternal grandfather, and on Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Why, exactly, did Friedman think neoconservatism is relevant to Jewish history?

An answer to that question lies in the year 1967, a watershed in postwar American Jewish politics. Chapter 6, “The Liberal Meltdown,” describes the escalation of violence in Vietnam; the emergence of a militant black power movement; the standoff between the New York City teacher’s union (representing mostly Jewish teachers in Brooklyn) and African-American activists who favored community control; and the support for adversarial politics among a new generation of American radicals, many of whom were of Jewish origin. Friedman, however, does not go beyond description to analyze why the New Left’s politics became the focal point for a palpable shift among liberals.

In my view, when the New Left attacked the American university as a bastion of imperialism and privilege, Jewish intellectuals—who had once fought tooth-and-nail against social antisemitism and university quotas—went on a counterattack, defending the university as the safeguard of the liberal values that had allowed Jewish integration into American society. Similarly, when the New Left championed the cause of militant radicals, including the Palestinians, against colonial power, and equated Zionism with racism, liberal intellectuals of Jewish origin felt threatened *as Jews*. In the typological thinking of these former liberals turned neoconservatives, the militancy of the black power movement, of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and of the PLO all represented an unleashing of “the mob” with its accompanying violence. At the same time, the Soviet-backed agitation in South America and the oppression of Soviet Jews made the Soviet Union the embodiment of a state with a “mob” mentality, which affirmed the neoconservatives’ earlier anti-Communism.

Whereas Friedman’s book focuses on the American scene, a longer view of Jewish history might interpret the neoconservative preoccupation with antisemitism as consistent with a conservative Jewish political tradition that goes back to the earliest years of settlement in Europe—a tradition shaped by suspicion of political extremism and social unrest. Until the 1880s, Jewish elites in Eastern Europe often staked

their community's security on the stability of Gentile authority and accommodated to its rule. These fears made a group of elite, postwar, and middle-class Jewish liberals ripe for a reassessment of the role of the American state in countering the international forces of "the mob"; in the 1980s, they embraced Reagan's international anti-Communist politics and trickle-down economic policies.

Adding to the neoconservative sense of instability and malaise was the assault on the middle-class family on the part of the New Left and the feminist movement. America, neoconservatives thought, was going to hell in a hand-basket, and the counterculture was to blame. What Friedman does not explore is the degree to which Jewish neoconservatives perceived the new social movements as threatening the Jewish family, the historical vessel for Jewish communal continuity. What links the neoconservatives' turn to Reaganite economics and international politics, alongside their rejection of multiculturalism and the "New History," is the quest for political stability and Jewish survival. Although some of Friedman's protagonists were not practicing Jews, they increasingly saw in religion a foundation for societal stability. Consequently, they sought to align themselves with public figures who articulated a need to return religion to the public sphere. This explains the neoconservative endorsement of school vouchers, a social program supported by members of the Christian Right—who, while not the usual political bedfellows of liberal Jews, were now comrades in the public defense of Israel and social morality.

Although Friedman intended his work as a revisionist attack on liberal Jewish historiography, *The Neoconservative Revolution* fails to do much more than outline the issues and name the many significant players involved with the movement. Given the resounding support American Jews gave to the Democratic party in the most recent presidential election, it appears that the neoconservative revolution has peaked and can now be assessed in terms of larger trends in modern Jewish history. The rise of the Jewish neoconservatives in postwar American politics should be seen as one expression of the process of acculturation of a group of mostly East European male Jewish children of the immigrant generation into mainstream American culture. They were an intellectual vanguard who brandished their pens at a time when the print media had vast public influence. But like all *intelligenti*, they were not necessarily in sync with the people they purported to lead.

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