

From the President

by Richard M. Ebeling

**THE
FREEMAN**
(Ideas On Liberty)

MAY 2004



Neoconservatives and the Freedom Philosophy

The winter 2004 issue of *The Public Interest* contains an article by Adam Wolfson, the publication's editor, on "Conservatives and Neoconservatives." Mr. Wolfson outlines some of the central ideas of neoconservatism by contrasting them with what he refers to as traditionalist conservatism, paleoconservatism, and libertarian conservatism.

Before World War II, he points out, conservatism was really classical liberalism, with strong emphases on individual freedom, laissez-faire economics, and progress through scientific improvement. In the post-war period, under the influence of Russell Kirk's 1953 book, *The Conservative Mind*, Mr. Wolfson says, American conservatism was transformed into a political philosophy critical of modernity and its unreflective belief that social and economic change always means progress. The Kirkian conservatives emphasized the roles of tradition, custom, local community, and institutional stability in maintaining the health and balance of society. The paleoconservatives, identified by Mr. Wolfson with ideas espoused by Pat Buchanan and Paul Gottfried, are anti-free trade, anti-immigration, isolationist in foreign policy, and suspicious of political and social equality.


As for libertarianism, Mr. Wolfson states that "It is progressive, and aims at expanding economic freedom and individual choice

ever-forward. Libertarians oppose all regulation, whether of markets or morals." He says that libertarians have a "love affair" with new technologies as the path to human happiness. And, in addition, they discount any role or place for "the general welfare" and are opposed to democratic decision-making in the shaping of a "public ethos." Thus in their pursuit of advancing the right of individual choice, the libertarian, he claims, is happy if citizens are indifferent to the well-being of their country.

What, then, does the neoconservative stand for? As summarized by Mr. Wolfson, neoconservatives recognize the value of traditions and customs passed down by earlier generations, but have no desire for or belief in returning to a past that is unrecoverable and unacceptable to the vast majority of contemporary Americans. Nor are neoconservatives desirous of a turning inward from the rest of the world, as he portrays the paleoconservatives; and the neoconservatives are against anything that would smack of a denial of democratic and social equality.

In contrast to Mr. Wolfson's view of the libertarian perspective, neoconservatives are not willing to sacrifice the idea of a public arena in which the democratic polity establishes standards for the common good to which all members of society should conform. Specifically, he says that neoconservatism has no inherent disapproval of the welfare state, which he suggests the vast majority of Americans desire as a means of overcoming "insecurity." Only those welfare-state programs

Richard Ebeling (rebeling@fee.org) is president of FEE.



corrupting of family, marriage, and the work ethic should be opposed. In addition, neo-conservatives believe in U.S. political and military interventionism around the world to advance democracy; but the goal of such foreign interventionism, he argues, is to maintain America's interests as a "great and powerful democracy."

Mr. Wolfson's portrayal of libertarianism and neoconservatism offers an opportunity to restate the fundamental premises of what FEE's founder, Leonard Read, long referred to as the "freedom philosophy." Over a 300-year history the advocates of human freedom have argued that rights reside only in individuals, who form the unique "building blocks" of the social, economic, and political order. Society should be viewed as the mutually beneficial relationships that individuals form for the improvement of their circumstances. The role of government, as understood, for example, by the American Founding Fathers, was to protect the rights of the individual from invasion by predatory plunder so each man may be secure in his life, property, and freedom to pursue his happiness as he sees it.

The Public Ethos

The "public ethos" is not created by government and, if it is to be healthy and consistent with the preservation of a free society, must not be controlled or manipulated by government. What is the "public ethos"? It comprises society's guiding beliefs, ideas, attitudes, customs, institutions, and ideals about the normative standards and rules for personal and interpersonal conduct. Its represents what most members of society consider to be acceptable and moral conduct in the relationships that men have with each other.

The public ethos of a free society includes strong beliefs in individual self-responsibility, the rights and dignity of the individual, and a sense of the morality of voluntary and peaceful relationships among men. It also includes the ideal that each individual should be viewed as an end in himself and not the

pawn of others. And it nurtures the philosophical and religious ideas of compassion and duty in participating in charitable good works to assist the unfortunate and the truly needy among us.

The public ethos of a free society rejects as inconsistent with liberty any notion that majorities or minorities may use the democratic process to restrict the freedom of the individual in his social, economic, and personal actions as long as he does not in any way violate the rights of others to peacefully go about their affairs. It does not believe that simply because a majority in society wants government welfare programs, because such programs give them a sense of protection from the insecurities of life, that this morally justifies the power of political coercion to redistribute wealth and limit the choices of other members of society to determine what is best for themselves, their families, and others they may care about.

The advocate of liberty is on guard against all expansions of government into the private lives and free associations of individuals because he considers political power to be corrupting and harmful to the creative potential in man. Political interventions and regulations intimidate man's mind and conscience, restrict his productive actions, weaken or eliminate the mutually beneficial and charitable associations among people, and undermine the moral sense of self-responsibility and voluntary duty to others in society.

Likewise, the friend of freedom believes that any "greatness" that America may possess on the international stage should come from being an example of individual freedom practiced at home, which then serves as an ideal for others around the world to emulate. Furthermore, political and military interventions abroad threaten the freedom and prosperity of the American citizenry, because of the costs of these global activities.

These are the freedom principles and the public ethos that we have been losing in America, and neoconservatism offers no alternative to regain them. □