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The rise of the neo-con artists In the wake of the attacks, many in the US were quick to drape themselves in the rhetoric of neoconservatism, even though they were far from true believers. Joshua Kucera examines how much sway the movement still holds

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The September 11 attacks demanded a dramatic response. Some fundamental shift in the way the US dealt with the rest of the world. But what?

Most Americans, who had largely tuned out of foreign policy since the end of the cold war a decade earlier, had no idea. Enter the neoconservatives.

The small group of foreign policy experts had for decades laboured in relative obscurity in think-tanks and as government advisers. These former Democrats - one leading neocon defined himself as "a liberal who's been mugged by reality" - have long argued that the US is a nation with a unique calling to bring democracy to the rest of the world. By force if necessary.

The neocons are especially devoted to the safety of Israel and neutralising perceived threats to it. Throughout the 1990s they argued vociferously - but, for the most part, to deaf ears - that Saddam Hussein was a grave threat to Middle East peace and needed to be overthrown.

In the aftermath of September 11, they seized the opportunity to promote the "democratisation" of the Middle East as protection against future 9/11s. They would soon wield influence far beyond their numbers, orchestrate the invasion of Iraq, and become the subject of conspiracy theories around the world.

"9/11 was a welcome development - not that the neoconservatives engineered it, but now that 9/11 had come, it created a wonderful opportunity to unleash the foreign policy agenda they had formulated," said Claes Ryn, a professor at the Catholic University of America and a leading expert on the neoconservative movement.

Today, Iraq is viewed as a debacle and the neoconservatives have mostly been discredited as utopian dreamers. But the neocons' time is not over. Top Bush administration officials, such as Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have either formed marriages of convenience with the neocons or adopted neoconservative ideas. Many true neoconservatives remain in important behind-the-scenes positions in the government and if the US attacks Iran, we will have the neoconservatives, in large part, to thank.

On September 11, several neoconservatives were already in key government positions. Paul Wolfowitz was deputy secretary of defence. Douglas Feith was undersecretary of defence for policy, and Richard Perle was chair of the Defence Policy Board Advisory Committee, an influential quasi-governmental organisation that deals with high-level Pentagon issues.

Just nine days after the attacks, the neoconservative think-tank Project for the New American Century wrote an open letter to President George W. Bush urging him to overthrow Hussein. "Failure to undertake such an effort will constitute an early, and perhaps decisive, surrender in the war on international terrorism," the authors wrote.

But none of the top decision-makers, including Mr Bush, were true neocons. Most subscribed to the opposing realist school of foreign policy, which argued for an unsentimental focus on US interests above questions of morality.

During the 2000 election campaign, Dr Rice took a jab at Bill Clinton's Kosovo invasion - which the neoconservatives supported, saying: "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten."

Mr Cheney worked in the Pentagon under the first George Bush and publicly defended the decision to not overthrow Hussein in 1991 after forcing Iraq out of Kuwait. "The question in my mind is how many additional American casualties is Saddam worth? And the answer is not that damned many," he said.

Mr Bush had no foreign policy experience when he ran for president, and relied heavily on advisers like Dr Rice and Mr Cheney. He said repeatedly during the campaign that he would promote a "humble" foreign policy without any nation-building adventures, warming the hearts of traditional conservatives like Professor Ryn.

"Did he really believe that or did he just say it because he thought the American people wanted to hear it?" he asked. "In hindsight, you have to wonder whether he didn't, from the very beginning, nurse very ambitious foreign policy plans."

Whatever the case, the neocons' influence after 9/11 became quickly evident. They were well organised and had a well-crafted message. They also shared certain important beliefs with traditional conservative realists, such as contempt for international consensus and faith in the muscular use of American power.

"There was a confluence of interests. It's not that people like Cheney laid down and simply let the neocons do what they want," said **Janine Wedel**, a professor at George Mason University who has studied the neoconservatives.

Under Mr Feith, two new intelligence analysis units were set up in the Pentagon to bypass the intelligence services and provide cherry-picked data to the White House that would justify an invasion of Iraq. Speechwriter David Frum coined the phrase "axis of evil" and provided a moralistic tone to Mr Bush's public addresses that appealed to the president.

"In a way, this is made-to-order for the neoconservatives," Professor Ryn said. "Here is a person [Mr Bush] who is going to carry out their intentions because he considers himself called by God to carry out these intentions. In his mind, God is smiling and pushing him forward. The neoconservatives can take advantage of this, and the speeches that are put in front of him are an admixture of Christian-sounding and neoconservative-sounding language."

Whether, and to what extent, other top administration officials like Mr Cheney, Mr Rumsfeld and Dr Rice have become neoconservative is a matter of debate, even as they have become the most visible exponents of the government's neoconservative policies.

In particular, Dr Rice has of late adopted many neoconservative principles. As secretary of state, she has spearheaded a recent reorganisation of the State Department - traditionally enemy territory for neocons - that she calls "Transformational Diplomacy", meant "to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people". She has also been at the forefront of America's aggressive defence of Israel during the recent war in Lebanon, referring to the conflict as the "birth pangs" of "a new Middle East".

Mr Rumsfeld and Mr Cheney have also adopted neoconservative rhetoric. Both often brag that the US has brought democracy to 50 million people in Iraq and Afghanistan, though they are still more likely to be the "bad cop" talking tough about terrorism to the democracy-building "good cop" that Mr Bush and Dr Rice play.

As the neoconservatives have emerged from the shadows and exerted greater influence, they have become the symbol to many critics of everything that is wrong with the Bush administration.

But some neoconservatives have drifted into obscurity. Many top neocons are no longer in government positions, such as Dr Wolfowitz, Mr Feith, Mr Perle, and Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Mr Cheney's former chief of staff who was indicted on obstruction and perjury charges related to the exposure of a CIA agent whose husband was a vocal critic of the Iraq war.

US foreign policy has, in some areas, taken a softer, more international, tack since they left their posts, for example more attention is being paid to multilateral negotiations over North Korea's nuclear programme.

The American public, too, is weary of the neocons' vision of worldwide democratisation. In a recent poll, 42 per cent of Americans said the US "should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own", up from 30 per cent since 2002.

Nevertheless, neoconservatives remain undaunted. The American Enterprise Institute, a leading neocon think-tank, is holding a conference this September 11 that attempts to answer the question: "Will the United States decide that an America that emphasises weakness, appeasement and surrender be safer and much less bothered?"

Many in the movement remain in advisory positions in the White House and Pentagon, and they are influencing quiet efforts to build a case for attacking Iran over Tehran's refusal to give up its nuclear programme.

While the administration's public rhetoric over Iran is far less aggressive than it was against Iraq, journalists in Washington have uncovered extensive military planning for an attack on Iran.

"I'm not predicting [an attack on Iran], but there's nothing in the president's behaviour that would make that look implausible," Professor Ryn said.

"Some of them [neoconservatives] are agitating quite aggressively for intervention in Iran, that's also a long-standing part of their vision," Professor Wedel said.

"The neocons are not always successful {hellip} but some knowledgeable people I'm talking with think they will succeed with Iran, and it wouldn't surprise me if they do."

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