

Prince of Darkness Denies Own Existence

by Dana Milbank via rialator - Washington Post *Tuesday, Feb 24 2009, 8:47am*

international / imperialism / other press

Listening to neoconservative mastermind Richard Perle at the Nixon Center yesterday, there was a sense of falling down the rabbit hole.



Richard Perle, incredulous revisionism

In real life, Perle was the ideological architect of the Iraq war and of the Bush doctrine of preemptive attack. But at yesterday's forum of foreign policy intellectuals, he created a fantastic world in which:

1. Perle is not a neoconservative.
2. Neoconservatives do not exist.
3. Even if neoconservatives did exist, they certainly couldn't be blamed for the disasters of the past eight years.

"There is no such thing as a neoconservative foreign policy," Perle informed the gathering, hosted by National Interest magazine. "It is a left critique of what is believed by the commentator to be a right-wing policy."

So what about the 1996 report he co-authored that is widely seen as the cornerstone of neoconservative foreign policy? "My name was on it because I signed up for the study group," Perle explained. "I didn't approve it. I didn't read it."

Mm-hmm. And the two letters to the president, signed by Perle, giving a "moral" basis to Middle East policy and demanding military means to remove Saddam Hussein? "I don't have the letters in front of me," Perle replied.

Right. And the Bush administration National Security Strategy, enshrining the neoconservative themes of preemptive war and using American power to spread freedom? "I don't know whether President Bush ever read any of those statements," Perle maintained. "My guess is he didn't."

The Prince of Darkness -- so dubbed during his days opposing arms control in the Reagan Pentagon - - was not about to let details get in the way of his argument that "50 million conspiracy theorists have it wrong," as the subtitle of his article for National Interest put it. "I see a number of people here who believe and have expressed themselves abundantly that there is a neoconservative foreign policy and it was the policy that dominated the Bush administration, and they ascribe to it responsibility for the deplorable state of the world," Perle told the foreign policy luminaries at yesterday's lunch. "None of that is true, of course."

Of course.

He had been a leading cheerleader for the Iraq war, predicting that the effort would take few troops and last only a few days, and that Iraq would pay for its own reconstruction. Perle was chairman of Bush's Defense Policy Board -- and the president clearly took the advice of Perle and his fellow neocons. And Perle, in turn, said back then that Bush "knows exactly what he's doing."

Yesterday, however, Perle said Bush's foreign policy had "no philosophical underpinnings and certainly nothing like the demonic influence of neoconservatives that is alleged." He also took issue with the common view that neocons favored using American might to spread democratic values. "There's no documentation!" he argued. "I can't find a single example of a neoconservative supposed to have influence over the Bush administration arguing that we should impose democracy by force."

Those in the room were skeptical of Perle's efforts to recast himself as a pragmatist.

Richard Burt, who clashed with Perle in the Reagan administration, took issue with "this argument that neoconservatism maybe actually doesn't exist." He reminded Perle of the longtime rift between foreign policy realists and neoconservative interventionists. "You've got to kind of acknowledge there is a neoconservative school of thought," Burt challenged.

"I don't accept the approach, not at all," the Prince of Darkness replied.

Jacob Heilbrunn of National Interest asked Perle to square his newfound realism with the rather idealistic title of his book, "An End to Evil."

"We had a publisher who chose the title," Perle claimed, adding: "There's hardly an ideology in that book." (An excerpt: "There is no middle way for Americans: It is victory or holocaust. This book is a manual for victory.")

Regardless of the title, Heilbrunn pursued, how could so many people -- including lapsed neoconservative Francis Fukuyama -- all be so wrong about what neoconservatives represent?

"It's not surprising that a lot of people get something wrong," Perle reasoned.

At times, the Prince of Darkness turned on his questioners. Fielding a question from the Financial Times, he said that the newspaper "propagated this myth of neoconservative influence." He informed Stefan Halper of Cambridge University that "you have contributed significantly to this mythology."

"There are some 5,000 footnotes," Halper replied. "Documents that you've signed."

But documents did not deter denials. "I've never advocated attacking Iran," he said, to a few chuckles. "Regime change does not imply military force, at least not when I use the term," he said, to raised eyebrows. Accusations that neoconservatives manipulated intelligence on Iraq? "There's no

truth to it." At one point, he argued that the word "neoconservative" has been used as an anti-Semitic slur, just moments after complaining that prominent figures such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld -- Christians both -- had been grouped in with the neoconservatives.

"I don't know that I persuaded anyone," Perle speculated when the session ended.

No worries, said the moderator. "You certainly kept us all entertained."

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