A Neocon Grows in Brooklyn

Jonathan Bronitsky

Making It
By Norman Podhoretz
(NYRB Classics, 1967, 2017)

Neoconservatives have never been especially popular on the right, to say nothing of the left. Since they emerged as a genuine political force in the early 1980s, they have been faulted by traditionalists for underemphasizing the role of morality in domestic affairs, yet denounced by realists and libertarians for overemphasizing the role of morality in foreign affairs.

If there were ever an opportunity for neoconservatives to start burnishing their movement credentials and rehabilitating their reputation, badly tarnished by the failures of U.S.-led democracy-promotion efforts in the Middle East, it was during the last election cycle. Almost en masse, however, neoconservatives united with liberals and progressives, whom they had long opposed, in resistance to the candidacy of Donald Trump.

Yet one leading neoconservative defied his compatriots by endorsing the real estate billionaire: Norman Podhoretz. His stand was all the more intriguing because his own son, John Podhoretz, is not only a vociferous disparager of Trump but also editor of *Commentary*, the position that Podhoretz the Elder held from 1960 to 1995. This discord suggests there have really been two generations of neoconservatives, separated by age as well as by area of interest and, more significantly, relation to the broader public.

Hints that Podhoretz, now eight-seven, would break at this heady juncture from his ideological and familial descendants, that he would side with the denizens of Middle America rather than with his direct neighbors in the Acela Corridor, are embedded in *Making It*, the personal reflection—usually designated a "memoir"—he published in 1967 at the precocious age of thirty-seven. Long out of print, it was recently reissued by NYRB Classics.

Making It is most often remembered, when it is remembered at all, for having exposed the "dirty little secret" of left-leaning intellectuals: that despite their declarations of altruism and denunciations of prosperity, they are just as desirous of power and material achievement as everyone else. The book introduced readers to "an astonishing revelation: it is better to be a success than a failure." Having made this great discovery, Podhoretz was determined to unravel "the curiously contradictory

feelings our culture instills in us toward the ambition for success."

He analyzed the anxieties of aspiration in perhaps the most scandalous way possible. *Making It* is packed with detailed, behind-the-scenes stories showcasing the attitudes and conduct of luminaries including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Phillips, Daniel Bell, Jason Epstein, Lillian Hellman, Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, and Hannah Arendt, to name but a few. This cadre was memorably dubbed "the Family," and its gatherings varied from splendidly raucous parties to Seder meals from hell.

Making It remains a captivating chronicle of self-creation and an adept study of class. But it has assumed new poignancy, revealing the evolving position of the American political intellectual. It reminds readers that neoconservatives—before they readily identified with the right—were highbrows who confronted other highbrows.

Take Irving Kristol, the "godfather" of neoconservatism. In 1952 he argued in *Commentary* that the American people trusted the "vulgar demagogue" Joseph McCarthy more than "the spokesmen for American liberalism" because they at least knew the senator was "unequivocally anti-Communist." In other words, Kristol was contending that regular Americans were wiser than the tenants of the Ivory Tower. This article was the most controversial of his prolific career.

Even when they gained access to elite institutions and rarefied company, neoconservatives remained outsiders in other ways. Growing up during the Great Depression in the outer boroughs of New York City, they had actually encountered the social problems they addressed in their writings. Irving Kristol affirmed that contributors to the *Public Interest*, the public policy quarterly he cofounded with Daniel Bell in 1965, had "known poverty firsthand—the authors of the War on Poverty were mainly upper-middle-class types—and witnessed the ways poverty was overcome in reality."

Born in urban ghettos and educated at New York City's free colleges, Kristol and his allies faithfully trusted their instincts, which gravitated toward the prudence of average Americans rather than the abstract prescriptions of Ivy League–trained "experts."

Although a decade younger, Podhoretz also grew up as an outsider. Once entrenched in "the wilds of literary New York," he realized the extent to which his rough-and-tumble stomping ground, the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, was closer to "flyover country" than to Manhattan. Podhoretz stayed away from books as a teenager, choosing instead to roam his tough neighborhood with a group of friends who nicknamed themselves the "Cherokees" and donned matching red satin jackets. He eventually stopped wearing the jacket but retained the combative demeanor.

Podhoretz attained his status through raw determination combined with the fortuitous assistance of patrons and informal advisers. A high school English teacher, Harriet Haft, immortalized as "Mrs. K.," embarked on transforming him into a "facsimile WASP" so he could earn a place at an exclusive university, where he "could get to know the best people" and "grow up into a life of elegance and refinement and taste." Lionel Trilling, the first Jew to receive tenure in Columbia's English faculty, guided him through the "High Temple of Culture and Civilization" in Morningside Heights. F.R. Leavis, the notoriously demanding editor of *Scrutiny*, taught him at Cambridge.

In school, Podhoretz was instructed in the traditions of Western civilization. While serving in the U.S. Army, he got a different kind of education when he was buddied up with "back-country Southern boys, real rednecks," who were "brave, proud, and unstintingly loyal." The product was a devotee to the life of the mind inclined to hit back against elites who blamed America

first—and was able to do so in their own language. Even when he was a leading figure of the non-Marxist left in the 1960s, *Commentary*, under Podhoretz's stewardship, "could always be trusted to tell its readers what was right with American society more frequently than what was wrong."

These notions challenge the conventional historiography of neoconservatism. In his brief introduction to this edition, *Wall Street Journal* drama critic Terry Teachout claims that neoconservatism "had yet to take shape when *Making It* came out." Too often it is assumed that Irving Kristol was thinking about the 1960s rather than the 1930s or the 1940s when he described a neoconservative as "a liberal mugged by reality." Indeed, the rightward movement of the first-generation neoconservatives—and Podhoretz—resulted as much from early discoveries as they did from the traumas of the Decade of Discontent.

Nearly everyone who has read about neoconservatism knows that political theorist Michael Harrington coined the term "neoconservative" in the Fall 1973 issue of *Dissent*. Yet the term was used by the New York Intellectuals before the end of World War II, and it retained the same meaning for decades. "The neo-conservatives of our time," observed social critic Dwight Macdonald in *Partisan Review* in 1943, "reject the propositions on Materialism, Human Nature, and Progress." In 1955, Kristol referred to himself as a "neo-conservative." Three years later, Podhoretz recorded that the immediate postwar period in America had been labeled "the age of conformity and neo-Conservatism."

Also forgotten is that Michael Harrington traced the "philosophy" of neoconservatism "back at least to Edmund Burke" and identified British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott as "perhaps the best known contemporary writer in this intellectual tradition." Lo and behold, Podhoretz devoured "every word" of Oakeshott and "all" of Burke at Cambridge. While abroad, he even wrote to Trilling, asking whether he would consider supervising a doctoral dissertation on Burke. In this sense, neoconservatism is older than we typically think.

In another sense, however, neoconservatism—or rather a variation of it—is younger than many of its detractors recognize. The project of first-generation neoconservatives was to safeguard institutions at home against rapid change. This Burkean goal was ultimately obscured by the ill-fated project of second-generation neoconservatives, who hoped to rapidly change institutions overseas, particularly in the Arab world.

The 2016 election offered a chance for neoconservatives to redeem themselves. Many tried to recover their lost authority by going to war against Trump, believing again that they were acting in the best interest of rural America. But even after the primary ended and Trump was chosen as the Republican nominee, they refused to pump the brakes. That pushed them back into a coalition with the liberal Establishment that their predecessors had rejected decades ago.

Podhoretz was the exception. Evoking the first generation that has largely passed, he pointed out that he was "anti-anti-Trump"—a nod to the "anti-anti-communists" like Kristol who chose between "lesser evils" during the McCarthy era. Podhoretz might have approvingly added that millions of Americans were behind Trump because they knew that Trump, unlike the contemporary "spokesmen of American liberalism," unapologetically loved America and unequivocally wished to advance the national interest. By supporting Trump, Podhoretz was remaining true to his roots. Throughout his career, he tried to remain connected to Brownsville, never forgetting where he came from.

Perhaps it was by no fault of their own that younger neoconservatives lost touch with their origins. Their world is smaller

today, and not in a good way. "One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan," Podhoretz asserted at the opening of *Making It*. That's not the case anymore.

These days, millennials are making the reverse commute, having found their homes in the now-chic neighborhoods the neoconservatives fled. Outside the coastal bubbles, socioeconomic forces are only driving people of different stripes further away from each other. It's doubtful we will again find a unified group of public intellectuals truly of the public—one that identifies with, let alone knows how to authentically express, the concerns of Middle America.

Jonathan Bronitsky *is writing a biography of Irving Kristol to be published by Oxford University Press.*