

**Michael Gerson and the Neoconservative Playbook**  
**By John C. Hulsman, PhD**

In reading *Heroic Conservatism*, Michael Gerson's effort to launch a new manifesto for the future of the Republican Party, the first thing that comes to mind is how well the man writes. Gerson, long the senior speechwriter for President Bush, takes us through the ringing declarations that have defined the current presidency. However badly delivered, here the words sing. And that is a tragedy, for the thinking behind them is so ruinously flawed.

While the writing is original in its use of language, the ideas are just more of the same; like the rest of his neoconservative allies, Gerson argues for the unfriendly takeover of the Republican Party by a school of thought with decidedly unconservative views. What happened to belief that limited, small-sized government works best? Unheroic, says Gerson. That Republicans, unlike Big Government Democrats, are the champions of civil liberties and accountability? Yesterday, says Gerson. That a government living within its means is a moral imperative, so as not to squander the advantages of future Americans? Short-sighted when others around the world are suffering, says Gerson. In fact, in his very un-Republican universality, Gerson lives up to his nickname in the Bush White House, 'The Christian Socialist.' While this is an honorable intellectual tradition, its tenets are a very awkward fit for America in general, and the Republican Party in particular.

The first rule in the neoconservative playbook is to obscure terms and conflate enemies. Just as Norman Podhoretz has done before him, Gerson talks of Islamofascism, as though Pan-Arab socialists, local Arab nationalists, and bin Laden's followers desiring a religious caliphate, have something in common. It was logic like this--al-Qaeda is the enemy, Saddam is the enemy, al-Qaeda and Saddam have some low-level contacts, al-Qaeda and Saddam are the same—that explains the rush to the Iraq war after the unconnected tragedy of 9/11. While Gerson makes some feeble nods at reality, mentioning that there are differences between the various groups, he also at critical junctures in the book, conflates enemies. For example, in pushing for the doctrine of

preventive war, that the U.S. has the right and obligation to attack other states that down the road may (or may not) prove a mortal threat to the country, Gerson conflates terrorists with states, such as North Korea and Iran, that are at odds with America. Gerson responds sweepingly if ahistorically, “where could terrorists get these (nuclear) weapons? In the short and medium term, those weapons would come from regimes that seek them, hate America, and maintain ties to terrorist groups. This kind of regime—every single one of them—is potentially a mortal threat to the American people.”

Well, no. While there is little doubt that stopping Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon is in the basic interests of the United States and Israel, everyone alive knows that the Iranians will be deterred from using such a weapon, if they acquire one, by the massive second-strike capabilities of both countries. President Ahmadinejad is an utter creep, but he is not in charge of the nuclear program; Supreme leader Khomeini, who is, shows no sign of wanting to end Persian culture forever. Remember, the far more evil Stalin and Mao, were effectively deterred as President Eisenhower suspected they would be; they had no desire for self-immolation.

Neither does it make sense that Iranians would be mad enough to give such weapons to terrorists, as though they had nothing to do with it. If, God forbid, there was such a strike, it is unlikely Israel and the U.S. would blame France for aiding the terrorists. We would all know where the weapon came from. Terrorists such as bin Laden will continue to try to acquire nukes; we must do everything possible to stop them, as here Gerson is right; they will not be deterred. But to, in the face of the past 50 years of history and all knowledge of Iranian political decision-making, sweepingly assert that rogue states and terrorists are the same thing is to wholly misunderstand the world we live in.

The second rule in the playbook is the total absence of any form of humility. Gerson’s subtitle says it all, “Why Republicans Need to Embrace America’s Ideals (And Why They Deserve to Fail If They Don’t).” Evidently the author is uniquely qualified to flesh out these grand precepts, and the rest of us morons in the party had better get with

the program if we want to survive. In *Ethical Realism*, my book with Anatol Lieven, we list five basic virtues of our beliefs. In many ways the most important of these is humility. The Ethical Realist and Protestant Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr composed the Serenity Prayer made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous, ‘God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ As Gerson and his ilk make clear, nothing is beyond them. It is this utopian limitlessness of his program which runs so counter to traditional Republican thought, steeped in the limits of even the best-intentioned men.

Such a program leads to Imperial Overstretch, the belief that only you can solve the world’s ills, which has been the death-knell of the world’s great powers from Rome, through the various European Empires. Its symptoms include persistent deficit spending, the decrease in the value of its currency, a ruining of the nation’s armed forces, a turning away of allies, a centralization of power, and a coarsening of the political culture. Sound familiar?

The final playbook rule is to move away from a facts-based world as quickly as possible. In fact, the best way to look at *Heroic Conservatism* is as just one more effort to explain away the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, and throwing reality to the wind, plead with the reader to let the neoconservative party go on, all facts to the contrary. It is a playbook designed to somehow validate the tragedy of the past few years. If facts prove to be stubborn things, they must be ignored. If the definition of a zealot is that it is a person who does not let facts get in the way of their theory, Gerson qualifies in spades.

Here Gerson and the rest of the neoconservatives again split from traditional conservatism; they in Max Weber’s words espouse an ethic of conviction rather than an ethic of responsibility. How can the neoconservatives explain the fact that they are turning budget surpluses into massive deficits, the fact that Iraq has led to the ruination of the national guard and the overstretch of the army, the fact that the Iraq war made Iran the dominant power in the Gulf and proved a recruiting bonanza for al-Qaeda, the fact that

according to all surveys America is viewed with greater suspicion than in decades, the fact that civil liberties have been called into question by an over-mighty executive? They respond in a way all good utopians would; 'Well, we meant well.' So did Robespierre.

Predictably, to question neoconservatism through a look at the facts underlying the past seven years is seen as the refuge of the cynical, for those with no or lesser convictions. These facts must be gotten around. Gerson says, 'sometimes, even in a tired time, even when the arguments against idealism have piled up in mountains, a thunderbolt can fall from the clear heights of heaven.' Evidently, the Almighty is against a facts-based foreign policy as well, so Gerson assures us.

For all his moralism, Gerson has missed a supremely important moral tenet. Certainly, some of what happened could and was seen beforehand. The great thinker Isaiah Berlin pointed out the fatal quality of all utopian thinkers--from Rousseau, to Trotsky, to Mao, to the neo-conservatives—if you know for certain you can bring humanity to peace, justice, and happiness, what price can be too high? Whatever the intervening facts say, to make this omelette there can be no limit to the number of eggs one might need to break. In ignoring empirical realities, by pleading a higher level of moral commitment, neoconservatives attempt to hide from responsibility for the past eight years of our faith-based foreign policy. We must not let them.

For Gerson, America is an instrument to bring this democratic utopia to the rest of the world. For the rest of us, it is a country we love and the greatest symbol of freedom in the world. But it is not primarily a tool. It is a place and people whose interests, and not those of a wider humanity, must come first. Indeed, they must for the precise reason that to fritter away American greatness, as Gerson and the rest of the Bush administration have done, weakens both the American example for the rest of the world, while diluting desperately-needed American power. Gerson has forgotten the ultimate moral point that must guide those who govern America; the injunction to leave it a better place than they found it for their children. Here the disastrous facts underlying the Bush presidency must not be obscured or neglected; they must be shouted from the rooftops.

