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Why Intellectuals Stumble

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No one will agree with everything Professor [Bruce Kuklick](#) of the [University of Pennsylvania](#) argues in this [opinion piece](#) published Sunday in [The Los Angeles Times](#), but it demands to be read anyway. In “[Bright and Wrong](#),” he argues that intellectuals often follow ideologies and fads rather than common sense — especially when it comes to advising U.S. presidents on foreign policy.

Since the end of World War II, successive White Houses have repeatedly brought in intellectuals and scholars to provide thoughtful moral and theoretical underpinnings for foreign policy decisions — and the experience through the years has been a mixed one at best. George Kennan, the brilliant young Sovietologist, was the first, immediately after WWII, and he was followed in subsequent years by, among others, the scholars affiliated with the Rand Corp. in the 1950s; President Kennedy’s “best and the brightest” — including McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Walt Rostow — in the 1960s; and, of course, the famous house intellectual of the Nixon-Ford years, Henry Kissinger. Although they generally professed deep understanding, these intellectuals who arrived in Washington with the imprimatur of the nation’s greatest universities and think tanks often found themselves groping in the dark. Much of the time, fashion was more important to their thinking than validity, and often they lacked elemental political common sense.

Kuklick begins his article with reference to the neo-conservative scholars who have been particularly influential in the current administration (but were also highly influential across the board in recent years). The article is worthy of close attention and a thoughtful response.

At the worldview level, I agree with the neo-conservatives about the reality of human evil and the reality of threats to freedom and human dignity. As a Christian, I root that evil and threat at a much deeper level than the neoconservatives. Irving Kristol once famously defined a neoconservative as a liberal who had been “mugged by reality.” Christians have been mugged by Genesis 3.

I differ with the neoconservatives in their overly-optimistic hope for democracy to emerge from a vacuum. As I see it, democracy (better defined as ordered or chartered liberty) requires the shared affirmation and embrace of certain principles and values, as well as the existence of mutual trust and obligation. Where these are not present, the survival of a representative democracy is doubtful, to say the least.

By the way, Professor Kuklick’s books, including his most recent, [Blind Oracles: Intellectuals nad War from Kennan to Kissinger](#), are worthy of serious reading as well.

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