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Con man

by [David B. Hart](#)

A review of *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* by Damon Linker

I should first confess that I cannot approach this book with perfect detachment. I am personally acquainted not only with its author, Damon Linker, but with Richard John Neuhaus and the rest of the so-called “theocons,” and I have cause to feel good will towards all parties involved.^[1] During his brief tenure as chief editor of Neuhaus’s journal *First Things*, Linker was an enthusiastic promoter of my work who left my prose unmolested and my ego intact. For a far longer time, however, I have enjoyed the friendship and generosity of Neuhaus and his associates; with them I have participated for years in an irregularly convoked theological colloquium, and solely for the pleasure of their company have endured the sort of meals that only gentlemen’s clubs can serve with untroubled consciences.

But, even if I find detachment impossible, I can still profess ideological disinterest. I am certainly not attracted to the drearily platitudinous liberal secularism that Linker has now apparently adopted as his political “philosophy,” but neither am I an adherent of the “theoconservatism” that Linker attributes—with a variable degree of accuracy—to Neuhaus and his circle (unless mere hostility to the “culture of death” is enough to earn one membership). So I think I am being fairly impartial when I say that *The Theocons* is a poor book—on any number of counts. It is frequently badly reasoned; it is marked by a surprising degree of historical ignorance; it is polluted by a personal animosity towards Neuhaus that—while denied by Linker—is both obvious and unrelenting; and it is extremely boring.

This last complaint, incidentally, is anything but minor. After all, apart from the small, slightly morbid interest roused by any public schism between former friends or allies, *The Theocons* makes only one claim upon our attention: its implicit promise of secrets revealed, a conspiracy exposed, an alarm sounded against the furtive approach of an unknown enemy. The brief *précis* that adorns the book’s cover reads thus: “For the past three decades, a few determined men have worked to inject their radical religious ideas into the nation’s politics. This is the story of how they succeeded.” This sounds rather exciting. And when Linker informs us that these men have achieved their victory by keeping a “low public profile” so as to “influence politics and policy quietly, behind the scenes,” our expectations are understandably raised. It comes, then, as a severe disappointment when all that follows is a biased but still essentially ordinary account—punctuated by discordantly shrill rhetorical flourishes and splashes of malicious and incredible psychological portraiture—of an entirely transparent and fairly moderate political “movement.”

According to Linker, theoconservatism is the bastard offspring of the youthful radicalism of Neuhaus and his chief co-conspirator David Novak, transposed into a conservative key, but no less

apocalyptic, revolutionary, and fanatical for all that. Its central tenet is that the moral and philosophical roots of the American political order lie not in secular reason, but in Christian theological tradition, which alone can provide an ethical and metaphysical rationale for our liberties, laws, and virtues. The theoconservative reading of the constitution, moreover, denies that the non-establishment clause was ever intended as a prohibition of participation by religious bodies in political or civil life, or as a call to purge religious expression from the “public square.”

And the theoconservatives are Catholics. Even the Jews among them are “honorary Catholics.” This, it seems, makes the movement especially sinister. The theocons may invoke “natural law” to argue against legalized abortion, euthanasia, or the destruction of human embryos for the purposes of medical experimentation, but the principal force behind their thinking is the moral “absolutism” and “authoritarianism” of the Roman Church, and of its two most recent pontiffs. It is obedience to inflexible papal pronouncements regarding a “culture of life” that has prompted the theocons to undertake their great plan to insinuate religion into American public life again, to capture political power, to alter the ideological complexion of the federal courts, and to conscript government into their project for the moral reform of American culture—a plan that has culminated in the election of George W. Bush, the first “theoconservative” president. Now they are poised, perhaps, on the very verge of total triumph, and—if Linker is to be believed—the possible consequences are terrifying to contemplate: our political system in thrall to Catholicism’s moral absolutism, science driven from our schools, economic and technological decline as we sink into a new epoch of credulous barbarism, isolation from the international community, and (naturally) a rise in anti-Jewish prejudice.

All of this, of course, is horrendous twaddle, and I do not know whether Linker actually believes any of it. I suspect, though, that his prognostications would be less hysterical were his narrative somewhat richer in genuine scandal. For the greatest problem bedeviling *The Theocons*, as I have said, is that Linker really has no story to tell, and so he has little choice but continually to raise his rhetorical stakes, no matter how unconvincing the ultimate effect. At the very end of the book, for instance, in his final acknowledgments, he tells us that it was only with reluctance that he broke with Neuhaus and resolved to turn his hand against the theocons; but he had to do it, he says: “Loyalty to the truth and devotion to the good of the nation demanded nothing less.” Well, I dare say G. A. Henty himself could scarcely have put it better, and who among us, while standing amid the carnage of Mafeking, jaw firmly set, eyes fixed upon the distant horizon, manfully refusing to reckon the number of his fallen comrades or missing limbs, has not felt moved to voice similar sentiments? But here such words—however fine—fall rather flat.

If I follow Linker’s story—stripped, that is, of its bombast—it goes rather like this: There is a group of articulate and influential thinkers in America who believe firmly in liberal democracy and free markets and things of that sort, but who also believe that the principles underlying modern democratic order are derived from a long history of European Christian thought regarding human authority. They are, moreover, convinced that the notion of the inherent dignity and worth of every human being is grounded in something older than liberal tradition. They also think that an impermeable “wall of separation” between public policy and private faith is an extra-constitutional and misguided principle. They believe that the lives of the unborn ought to be protected in law, and that the Supreme Court’s decisions pronouncing abortion a constitutional right are a collection of willful jurisprudential fictions. They regard the traditional family as a desirable institution, believe marriage to be the union of a man and a woman, and are somewhat anxious concerning the drift of modern culture towards an ever greater coarseness and ever more pronounced indifference to innocent life.

Now, whether one agrees or not, none of these convictions is, by any sane measure, “extreme”; they all fall well within one of the broad main currents of American political and social thought. Nor are

any of the historical claims involved particularly fantastic (though Linker knows too little of the history of ideas to see this). Nor, surely, is it any secret that persons holding such views have supported George Bush in both of his presidential campaigns, and that some of them continue to offer him advice. Nor, as far as I can tell, has anyone among the “theocons” made any attempt to keep it a secret. If these men are in fact “radicals,” they are far and away the most unadventurous radicals ever to have appeared on our political horizon.

Linker, though, is undeterred by any of this. The theocons *are* radicals, dangerous and subversive, deluded and imperious, contemptuous of liberty and law, and he will prove it. His chief exhibit is a rather notorious symposium published in *First Things* in 1996 called “The End of Democracy?”—wherein Neuhaus and company railed against the “judicial usurpation of politics” that had become increasingly evident since the Supreme Court’s verdict in the 1992 abortion case *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, and did so in perhaps intemperate (and even somewhat chiliastic) terms. And, indeed, those were difficult days, I would imagine. It was hard to react equanimously to *Casey* especially, what with its almost vaudevillian insolence towards the Constitution and its cretinous language regarding “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” (that odd, horrifying moment when the nation’s highest court seemed to have become the creature of Hugh Prather and Richard Bach). But the *First Things* symposium—though therapeutic in the way howls of despair often are—was clearly a rhetorical aberration.

When Linker actually describes the methods employed by the theocon conspiracy, it turns out that they consist principally in encouraging Christians to vote for conservative politicians who will use legislation, referenda, constitutional amendments, and court appointments to frustrate the secularist agenda. Moreover, though Linker speaks of the decade 1984–1994 as the period of the theocons’ “stealth campaign” to seize power, he can only report that they advanced their cause in those years by founding magazines and think tanks, seeking funding for both, associating with conservative forces within the Catholic Church, and forging ties between conservative Catholics and conservative Evangelicals.

This is all very cunning, I expect, but I believe the customary term for such methods is “democratic politics” (though I am prepared to be corrected on this). I have to say also that if this is how the theocons conduct themselves when they are being stealthy, I dread to think how they might behave if they ever chose to be indiscreet. Indeed, given that almost all the evidence that Linker amasses against the theocons is drawn from their published writings, one might very reasonably conclude that, as secret conspiracies go, this one seems a bit thin on the secrecy side.

At the end of the day, though, none of this matters very much. *The Theocons* is really about Richard John Neuhaus, whom it is Linker’s obvious aim to portray as a somewhat unbalanced and volatile martinet, with an appetite for violent rhetoric and a pathetic need to submit to unquestioned authority in every sphere of life. He devotes considerable attention to certain editorials Neuhaus wrote in the wake of the Catholic Church’s sex abuse scandal, not because they are in any way germane to his book’s putative topic, but because he wants to imply that Neuhaus will lay aside even his moral “absolutism” if he thinks it in the interest of the Catholic Church that he adopt a more “relativist” line (though, in fact, those editorials suggest nothing of the sort). Oddest of all, he even tries to insinuate that the almost romantically philosemitic Neuhaus might be guilty of a certain hostility towards Jews.

To dwell on this at length would be distasteful. All I can say is that the Neuhaus I know is a reflective, intelligent, self-possessed, generous, and principled man; he is opinionated (definitely), but not at all spiteful or resentful towards those who disagree with him; words like “absolutist” are vacuous abstractions when applied to him. His magazine publishes articles that argue (sometimes quite forcibly) views contrary to his own, and he seems quite pleased that it should do so. While still

in Neuhaus's employ, Linker was admirably honest regarding his (in my view, entirely correct) opposition to the invasion of Iraq, but had no cause to fear for his job in consequence. I could go on. It is probably sufficient, though, to say that I do not see anything at all of the real Neuhaus in the lurid portrait Linker has painted of him, and I find it difficult to believe Linker does either. But, then again, who cares? Whatever Linker's motives, he has produced a book that is almost comically alarmist without being even momentarily interesting, and that is shame enough for anyone who aspires to be a writer.

Notes

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1. *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege*, by Damon Linker; Doubleday, 304 pages, \$26. [Go back to the text.](#)

David B. Hart's most recent book is *Atheist Delusions* (Yale).

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