Episode 490: The Neoconservatives: Jacobins, Not Conservatives

Guest: Claes Ryn

WOODS: I have been talking about your work or quoting it one way or another for years, saying this is the way a real conservative thinks. The trouble is it seems like we're down to about 17 real conservatives left in the world who would even recognize what we're talking about.

RYN: Yeah, what is a real conservative?

WOODS: That's the question. And as a libertarian myself with great conservative sympathies, the one advantage I think libertarians have philosophically over conservatives is that it's easy to identify, much, much easier to identify a libertarian, precisely because we have the features that Russell Kirk was proud that conservatives did not have, because we are an ideology. We come right out and say that. We have certain principles we believe in, and if you don't believe in those principles, you don't belong to the club. Whereas, with a conservative, it's harder.

RYN: Well, I just want to say that ideology is a tricky word. It could have a pernicious meaning and a better meaning. If by ideology you mean a reluctance to take into account or to adapt to historical circumstances, then it tends to become dubious. But if all of what you mean is that you have a systematic view of the whole, then I don't see that one could object to it.

WOODS: Okay, well then I accept that caveat absolutely. Let's start off with your work that actually dates back to 1991, but is so relevant today, and that is *The New Jacobinism*. Just so the audience understands what you're saying, explain to us what the old Jacobinism was, so that we can see exactly what it is you are accusing the neoconservatives of.

RYN: The old Jacobins were the intellectual activists behind the French Revolution of 1789 — or it's said to have started in 1789; it rolled on for quite a long time. And their idea was that the old society had to be flushed out, you needed to have a clean slate, and you needed to implement what they regarded as universal principles. Freedom, equality, and brotherhood is how they summarized their ideology.

And it struck me at an early stage when the people who came to be known as the neoconservatives were speaking about politics that they sounded very similar. They

would make the argument, for example, that America is founded on universal principles, and they often wanted to say on abstract principles. That is to say, if you want to understand America, you don't look to its actual historically evolved culture and constitutionalism, but you look to these ideas which are supposed to make America unique.

Now, the difference between the old Jacobins who were French and what I started calling the New Jacobins is that, whereas the French had made France into the savior of nations, the missionary country, the New Jacobins had designated America for this role. And the role was to spread these universal principles, which they sometimes summarized as democracy; sometimes they used freedom. But in any case, America is this exceptional country, in that it was founded on these universal principles, and it is called by history, as it were, to help implement this view of society all over the world.

WOODS: And the way they pitch it, the same somebody like a Bill Bennett, when he talks about moral clarity, what they seem to be saying is that if you don't believe in the way that we are carrying out and exporting these principles, then you are a historicist or you are a moral relativist, and therefore an enemy of true conservatism.

RYN: Yeah, here we can see a connection — not identity, but a connection — between the so-called neoconservatives and what you might regard as a kind of an academic branch of much the same thing, namely the followers of Leo Strauss. That is, the Straussians have this idea that, as a philosopher, you are never respectful of tradition or history or the ancestral or the conventional. The thinker is always concerned about what Strauss calls the simply right, sort of a model of right that exists quite apart from tradition. As a matter of fact, for the Straussians, there's always necessarily a strong tension, even a radical obsession, between philosophy and tradition, traditionally evolved authority. This is a very deeply held view among the Straussians.

And so in this regard, there is a great deal of similarity between the Straussians and the neoconservatives, in that they have tried to teach Americans that what makes America admirable and makes it unique is that it is based, not on the traditions of the bad old days, but having seen the light, having seen principles. And these principles authorize the United States to try to remake the world, to kick out the dictators wherever they are, so that democracy can flourish.

WOODS: So you say that this — which is what is taken for granted by almost everyone, because everybody listens to right wing radio, who identifies as a conservative — this is not what conservatism is supposed to be. Well if conservatism is not spreading American ideals around the world and being a beacon of freedom and exerting American leadership, then what is it?

RYN: Well, that would require — it might be a long response. But to try to focus on what makes traditional American conservatism very different from neoconservatism, the older conservatism was very much aware — so aware that it wouldn't even have to say explicitly — that America has its roots in an old Western tradition, specifically Christianity, as mediated by British culture. And you don't need to read very far into

something like *The Federalist Papers* to see that Rome, republican Rome, was very much in their minds. And these were, for the most part, very highly educated people by our standards, people who could write in Greek to each other, quoting poetry and such.

And they, without making this always explicit, they always assumed that they were Brits, who had been as it were displaced for one reason or another. They were living within American constitutionalism, which came out of British, Western, classical, Christian tradition. And it's not a coincidence that they put together the kind of constitution that they did. They had the kind of personalities, the kind of culture, the kind of religious sensibility that would predispose them to write a constitution of precisely this kind.

So if you want to understand what America was, and to some extent, still is, you would need to investigate where America came from. And so you are led specifically to British tradition, the rights of Englishmen, the common law, and many other things British, and also you are led to Christianity; you are led to the classical heritage. In other words, you can't really understand the mindset that created the U.S. Constitution if you don't know the historical origins.

And that is precisely what the Straussians specifically do not want Americans do to. Harry Jaffa, for example, one of the Straussians who recently died and who was affiliated with the Claremont Institute, spent an entire career trying to persuade Americans that what makes America distinctive is that it breaks with the, as he would have it, the bad old days. America is all about innovation. It's starting fresh. This is mankind taking a leap into the future, disregarding all of what went before. He says that to understand America is to celebrate revolution. We did after all have a revolution, did we not? Well, the historian looking at the same Constitution sees just the opposite, namely that the Constitution came out of a specific tradition. And you cannot hope to understand the real Constitution without looking at all of what lies implicit in it by way of view of human nature and society.

WOODS: Now, you mentioned the Christian tradition as important to understanding the American tradition, but yet the neocon idiom, let's say, that they use when talking about the American obligation to intervene around the world is shot through with Christian imagery and Christian language. Is that just a cynical appeal to the religious sensibilities of their followers? Where does that come from, and couldn't they just as easily say we too are making a Christian appeal? We are the city on the hill and so on and so forth.

RYN: You are of course right, that the rhetoric often sounds somewhat like the symbolism of the older tradition, but only somewhat. But this was true also of the old Jacobins. The French Jacobins frequently used phraseology that called to mind Christian symbols. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, who greatly inspired Robespierre, one of the leaders of the revolution, managed in large measure to sell his radical redefinition of morality by using Christian-sounding terminology. He wrote about simplicity of life. He wrote about nature. He used all kinds of terms, which are

now used nowadays by the Straussians to signal that they may be standing in the same general tradition. But everything depends, not on terms, but on how you define them, what you really mean by them. And there you find a rather sharp contrast between the Straussians and neoconservatives on one side and a more traditional conservative like Russell Kirk, to say nothing of Edmund Burke and various others in that tradition.

WOODS: In fact, on today's show notes page, which will be TomWoods.com/490, I'll of course link to your books and to information about you, but I'm also going to link to a previous episode I did with Richard Gamble, who's done a whole book on the use of the city on a hill imagery, which is central to so much American government propaganda. And speaking of which, I want to read to you a sentence from an article you wrote 10 years ago, talking about one of the great propagandists of our time, George W. Bush, who somehow managed to succeed in getting the United States into a war in Iraq that had nothing to do with anything.

And you wrote this: "It should by now be obvious that, in his foreign policy views at minimum, the President of the United States is no conservative. He is a Jacobin nationalist." Take that, Rush Limbaugh. So tell me exactly what you mean. I bet we could figure it out by now, but tell me what you mean by that, and tell me how would a real conservative look at foreign policy or look at Saddam Hussein and respond?

RYN: Well, let me begin with the latter part of your question. Could one not argue that there is a particular approach to things that the U.S. Constitution embodies? It's about checking power, channeling power, taming power. Power seeking is potentially a huge problem, according to the framers. You need restraint. Now, restraint is going to be imposed by the institutions of the Constitution. That goes without saying. But they understood very well that you're not going to have people respect this restraint, to be governed by law unless they have personalities to correspond to this constitutionalist temperament.

And applying this general outlook to foreign policy, could one not argue that the very principle of restraint and of checking and balancing ought to be a natural outcome of this general outlook? The framers did not believe that any particular partisan interest had a monopoly on serving the common good. On the contrary, you had to listen to different points of view. The people in the other party might actually have a good part of the truth, surprisingly. That is to say, they would reject what you mentioned earlier, this idea of moral clarity that was popular on the neoconservative side. That is, if there is right and wrong, you have to have moral clarity, meaning you have to be on the side of the right. But the problem is, given the epistemological condition of humanity, finding out just what is right is darn hard.

And the framers recognized that, and so they believed that we should proceed under self-imposed restraints. We ought to deliberate, genuinely deliberate, on these questions. It's hard to find the course. It's hard to know what the common good is. Well, that whole attitude naturally from their point of view would be applied to foreign policy. There too, you do not have a monopoly on truth. Nobody has a monopoly on truth. You talk to the French about whether America's exceptional, and

they will give you a debate on it. They will claim, how dar you call yourselves exceptional; what about us? And the same with virtually every other people. So this notion that you have goodness and right on one side and sheer evil on the other is of course very alien to the constitutional temperament.

And here we get to George Bush, who actually ran for president on a promise that he would want to install a more humble U.S. foreign policy. That's what he did. And so there were some people — I was one — who thought that possibly he might actually mean what he said in the election campaign. I was suspicious, however, because he had Paul Wolfowitz as one of his key foreign policy advisors, and of course, 9/11 gave the neoconservatives a golden opportunity to play upon the indignation of the new, rather inexperienced, the not very learned president, and they fed him speeches, and he rather liked the tone of it. So he gave that speech at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., where he said things like, "You're either for us or you're against us," the assumption being we're on the side of right, and if you're against us, you're supporting evil.

And you got neoconservatives around that time who would write books with titles like "End to Evil," which was coauthored by two leading neoconservatives. That whole mentality, that you have good standing against evil is more Jacobin in quality than it is Christian. Now, it's true, Christianity believes in good and evil. There's God and there's the devil. But for us human beings, it's sometimes exceedingly difficult to know what is the side of the angels and what is the other side.

WOODS: But let's suppose we have the case of a regime that practically everybody would acknowledge is evil. There's still a difference in the way the neocons and a traditional conservative would look at it. The traditional conservative would never for a moment publish a book called *An End to Evil*; it wouldn't occur to him. What you do, as Richard Weaver says, is you try to limit evil; you try to hem it in the best you can, but you don't have this delusion that evil can be extirpated from the face of this earth. There's a completely different approach to issues like this between the two types of conservative.

RYN: Yes, and unfortunately, believing as the neocons did had disastrous consequences. That is, believing that democracy and freedom would flourish as soon as you kick out the dictators made them think about the war against Iraq the way they did. I had a curious experience just a year after the invasion of Iraq. David Brooks had written a column in *The New York Times*, in which he conceded that he had had second thoughts about the invasion. It's not that he regretted that the U.S. was there, but he regretted what he called "childish fantasies" on his own part, with regard to how easy it would be to install democracy in Iraq.

Now, it is amazing that people with those kinds of childish fantasies, because that's what they are, would have been in charge of U.S. foreign policy. There was absolutely nothing unexpected about how the invasion of Iraq would turn out. Only if you were blinded by ideology of the bad kind could you have expected that the Americans would be greeted with flowers and that people would have rushed to the polls and cast

ballots and you would have a wonderful regime. No. What happened in Iraq was virtually inevitable, and it could have been foreseen.

WOODS: I'm going to also link to an episode with, which his name is escaping me, but a professor who'd written a book on the situation in Iraq and evaluating it after the fact, and was on the Left, but we had a very good discussion, because he pointed out to me at one point, he said, I can't think of any political thinker farther removed from the neoconservatives than Edmund Burke, which I thought was quite interesting and revealing coming from him. But does it make you ever wonder, given precisely how easy it was to predict the outcome in Iraq, are you ever inclined to accept the theory that some of the neocons really couldn't have been that stupid? Like, I could imagine George W. Bush falling for some of this, but maybe some of them want the chaos.

RYN: Yes, I think that point needs to be considered. Looking at some of the writings of neoconservative intellectual activists, you have to ask that question. That is to say they're simply cynically using the kind of rhetoric that they think that the stupid yahoos will go for. But at the same time, I think there's also a matter of — what would you call it? Self-persuasion. That is, by speaking this way over the years and communicating in these terms, you create a kind of imaginative inner-life that makes you interpret events according to this view that you both hold and do not hold.

I think, say for example, with the Straussians, you find in so many of them a deep ambivalence about so many of the things that they say. They claim on the one side to be concerned about natural rights and the universal, but on the other hand, so many of them are not at all persuaded — I'm not sure about Strauss — that natural rights or the universal even exist. Somebody like Allen Bloom, for example, who wrote that bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, I think was ultimately a kind of Nietzschian nihilist.

WOODS: Okay, that's a — wow. Can you run with that a little bit? I didn't see that coming at all.

RYN: Well, it would take quite a long time to sort out everything that's —

WOODS: All right, some time I'll have to have you on, because you've got to elaborate on that at some point. That's not what I would have heard growing up as a young conservative at all.

RYN: No, that book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which was a huge bestseller was very greatly misunderstood, especially by so-called conservatives. They thought that Allan Bloom was offering a conservative philosophy, and he was going after the liberal establishment. But that was not at all the case. The mind whose closing he bemoaned in that book was the Enlightenment mind, as interpreted by him. And for him, the classical writer, Socrates, the philosopher, is a pre-Enlightenment philosopher.

No, here, Allan Bloom stepped in the footsteps of, for example, Louis Hartz, the liberal tradition in America. This is a typical example of the effort to reinterpret the American tradition so as to wean Americans off of their attachment to the actual historical origins of America. This is to persuade Americans that they are a new people; they started fresh; they swear by universal principles, and whatever you do, don't think that you can explain anything by going back into this outdated Christianity and the common law and the rights of Englishmen and Roman republicanism. That is, we've had for a very, very long time, starting in the late '40s and '50s, a surge of efforts to convince Americans that they are not what they thought they were. They are actually advocates of universal principles.

Now, the question you broached was, could they really believe this about America as they apply foreign policy? That is, mankind has been waiting all these years for America to spearhead democracy all over the world. Are they as naive as that? No, I don't think that they are quite as naive as that, not all of them.

WOODS: Before I let you go, I want to ask you — well, I'm going to ask you about your book in a minute, but I want to know — you must have thought this over — when did things go wrong? When did these, the neoconservative and Straussian ideas, take over? When was there a tipping point, such that somebody like Russell Kirk couldn't have even gotten a start today in this atmosphere?

RYN: I don't think there was a tipping point. These things originate in the universities, and then they start to simmer in the media. You would have to trace this back a long time. You can see that there's even a homegrown precedent for this is Woodrow Wilson, his desire to make the world safe for democracy, for example. Politically — and I'm not saying that politics is the hub of the wheel. I do not believe that it is. But politically you could argue that a kind of a tipping point was the Ronald Reagan administration. That is to say, the neoconservatives were very fortunate to get a number of key positions in the Reagan administration. William Bennett, for example, very effectively did away with Reagan's commitment in the platform to do away with the U.S. Department of Education. Under his tutelage, the U.S. Department of Education doubled its budget. But in general, neoconservatives were quite numerous there, which irritated more traditional conservative movement types, because they thought they were more entitled. But I would stay away from identifying any tipping point, to use your word.

WOODS: You mentioned Bill Bennett. Of course, the man who had been in the running for that position, we all know was Mel Bradford, M.E. Bradford, who had been in a fight with Harry Jaffa for years, an intellectual battle over the nature of conservatism, whether equality, this abstract principle of equality, could be considered a constituent part of conservatism — he rejected that completely. But when you compare Bradford and his work to Bennett, I mean, Bennett wrote this totally sophomoric dissertation that has, I think in the Works Cited page, he's got 13 books for his PhD dissertation. I mean, this is the guy we got instead of the terrible Bradford. That's neoconservatism in a nutshell really. I want you to take a minute to tell us about your brand new novel, called *A Desperate Man*. I had not known about this, but I guarantee you I will read it.

RYN: It's a moral and political thriller, and it's an attempt to describe the condition of basically civilized people who find themselves in circumstances where everything seems to conspire against what they believe in. They see their society falling apart, and it's an attempt to explain or to show the possibility of actions that they take. Now, it's not supposed to be, but it's reputed to be a page-turner. It may be. People seem to be really engaged by it. But I think it is in general an imaginative account of the state of our civilization. What's going to happen and how will people deal with this? Are we ready to deal with a society that is going to fall apart? That's something that the reader will need to contemplate.

WOODS: I'm going to link to that and other books of yours and a couple of your articles related to what we've been talking about at TomWoods.com/490. Well, Professor Ryn, I'm extremely grateful to you. I wasn't sure I'd be able to get you on the show, and here you are. As I said, I've been quoting you like crazy over the years, and it's just been a delight to talk to you. Thanks so much.

RYN: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.