

Elite factionalism for a new age?

*A Tale of Two Factions:
The US Power Structure Since World War II (Second Edition)*

Joseph P. Raso
(Self-published, 2020)

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The central argument of Joseph P. Raso's self-published *A Tale of Two Factions* is that, since World War II, the 'deep political history' of the US is actually a struggle within the 'oligarchy' that rules America; between its 'two ruling factions' – identified respectively as the 'liberal' right and 'conservative' right (p. 6) – for 'dominance in the world's most powerful country'. (p. 1) The competition between these two factions, claims Raso, has not only 'shaped the destiny of the United States', but has also 'profoundly affected much of the world'. (p. 1)

According to Raso's definitions, the 'liberal' faction, which was originally associated with the Eastern Establishment, can be described as 'center-right, corporate liberal, and corporate internationalist or globalist'. The 'global objectives' of the liberal faction 'tend toward neo-totalitarianism'. As for the 'conservative faction' it has a 'right-wing, reactionary and more nationalist orientation', with some of its elements supporting 'neo-fascism'. More importantly, claims Raso, neither of these 'oligarchic factions' reflect genuine liberalism or conservatism. (pp. 6-7)

Raso's thesis brings him into conflict with the views of most conspiracists and other commentators, that in the case of the United States, the ideological duopoly is little more than a carefully constructed façade designed to distract the masses from the secret unity of its ruling elites. Furthermore, this governing stratum – known variously as the 'Power Elite',¹ 'The Eastern Establishment',² 'Insiders'³ the 'Shadow Government',⁴ 'National Security

¹ <<https://www1.udel.edu/htr/American/Texts/power.html>>

² <<https://reason.com/1973/01/01/the-eastern-establishment-cons/>>

³ <<https://www.biblio.com/book/insiders-mcmanus-john-f/d/1435983962>>

⁴ <<https://shorturl.at/foJZ8>> or <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12005830-from-shadow-party-to-shadow-government>>

State',⁵ and more recently, the 'Deep State'⁶ – are not only the *real* power-holders in the country, but are *united* in service of a single ideology and the same ultimate goal. There is some discord, though, amongst analysts and other activists as to exactly what that shared goal is. The options range from erasing US freedom and sovereignty in order to achieve a 'One World Government';⁷ mirroring it in 'endless wars'⁸ in service of global imperialism and the military-industrial complex; or transforming it into an 'high-tech, totalitarian, global panopticon'.⁹ Nevertheless, we are repeatedly assured, elite factionalism is an illusion:¹⁰ 'they' are all in it together, utterly devoted to the same diabolical goal, whatever it may actually be.

Raso's contention that the famed elite consensus of the Cold War era only hid deeper divisions within the ruling class is not a particularly novel argument. Numerous analysts have claimed over the years that America's power elite was fractured along ideological, geographical and sectoral lines that were more significant than the Republican-Democrat duopoly. A prime example was Carroll Quigley who, in his *Tragedy and Hope* (1966), had memorably claimed the 'Eastern Establishment' essentially functioned as the American arm of an 'international Anglophile network', an 'elaborate, semi-secret organization', centred on the Round Table that was devoted to Anglo-American unity. (pp. 950, 954). But Quigley also observed a more interesting trend in the 1950s, with new forces threatening the dominance of the Eastern Establishment:

[T]he economic influence of the older Wall Street financial groups has been weakening and been challenged by new wealth springing up outside the eastern cities, notably in the Southwest and Far West. These new sources of wealth have been based very largely on government action and government spending but have, none the less, *adopted a petty-bourgeois outlook rather than the semi-aristocratic outlook that pervades the Eastern Establishment*. This new wealth, based on petroleum, natural gas, ruthless exploitation of national resources, the

⁵ <<https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3491&context=lcp>>

⁶ <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/how-the-deep-state-came-to-america-a-history/>>

⁷ <<https://shorturl.at/fintI>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/27/sarah-palin-celebrates-brexit-says-uk-avoided-apocalyptic-one-world-government/>>

⁸ <<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/challenge-elite-consensus-endless-war/>>

⁹ <<https://shorturl.at/bvBJV>> or <<https://internationalman.com/articles/the-great-reset-and-the-future-of-money-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>>

¹⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/4kdekfat>> or <<https://www.conspiracyarchive.com/2015/07/17/the-illusion-of-elite-unity-elite-factionalism-the-war-on-terror-and-the-new-world-order-part-1/>>

aviation industry, military bases in the South and West, and finally on space with all its attendant activities, has centered in Texas and southern California. Its existence, for the first time, made it possible for the petty-bourgeois outlook to make itself felt in the political nomination process instead of in the unrewarding effort to influence politics by voting for a Republican candidate nominated under Eastern Establishment influence. (*Tragedy and Hope*, pp. 1245-46; emphases added.)

Quigley's observations about this challenge to the dominance of the Eastern Establishment was subsequently adopted by a number of analysts in 1960s and 70s to explain the tumult of those times: the assassinations of the President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, the Watergate scandal, and the moral and strategic disaster that was the Vietnam War.

The late Carl Oglesby in his book *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (1976), for example, linked all these events to a 'deep struggle of rival power elites', which he identified respectively as 'Yankees and Cowboys'. This was essentially a geographic and ideological division within the US plutocracy between the 'East Coast monopolist[s]', who subscribed to Atlanticism and were more committed to détente with the Soviet Union, and the Southwestern 'tycoon entrepreneur' types, who tended to be more militantly anti-communist and were more deeply embedded in the oil and armaments industries. Similar formulations were offered by Kirkpatrick Sale in his book *Power Shift* (1975), which looked at the clash between the old Eastern Establishment and newly emerging power centers in the 'Southern Rim', particularly in Texas and California. Another variation was Michael T. Klare's notion of the 'Trader' and 'Prussian' factions within the 'US power structure'. The Traders, comprised of 'corporate managers and international bankers', sought greater collaboration amongst the capitalist powers through the trilateralist framework to establish a more united front against Third World radicalism and greater détente with the Soviets. The 'Prussians', in contrast, consisting of 'military officers, intelligence operatives, Cold War intellectuals, arms producers, and some domestic capitalists', opposed détente and pursued a more militarist approach to Third World radicalism.¹¹

Other contributions to this genre include Sidney Blumenthal's *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment* (1986), which chronicled the rise of a 'conservative elite', who developed their own network of think-tanks, supported by tax-exempt foundations, to oppose their own *bête noir* – the so-call 'Liberal Establishment'. Blumenthal's work also chronicled the rise of the neo-conservative movement, itself the subject of innumerable works during the

¹¹ Michael T. Klare, *Beyond the 'Vietnam Syndrome'* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981) pp. 5-6.

troubled presidency of George W. Bush. The sudden success of the neo-conservative faction and its apparently disastrous impact on US global strategy was addressed in Jacob Heilbrunn's *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (2008) and Fred Kaplan's *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (2008).

More recent efforts have focused on the differences, not just between the neo-conservatives and the liberal internationalists, but deeper divisions between the so-called interventionist 'blob',¹² which covers most elite foreign policy factions, and the anti-interventionists or 'restrainers' from the right and left.¹³ This has prompted some academics to develop even more elaborate typologies. Raphael BenLevi, for example, from the University of Haifa, recently identified five 'competing grand-strategic schools of thought' in the US, each with their

Table 1. Grand Strategic Schools of Thought in the United States (1990–2020)

	Primacy	Realism	Assertive Internationalism	Progressive Internationalism	Neo-Isolationism
Grand Strategic Paradigm	Predominance of American power brings stability; benign hegemony; unilateralism	Balance of power brings stability; national interest; use force with caution	Use American power to bolster international institutions; use force multilaterally	International institutions before national interest; global problems require global solutions	Minimize overseas deployment (all); national interest limited in scope (nationalist-libertarian); American power threatens others; cosmopolitan human rights (Left)
Political Party (1990s +)	Republican	Republican; some Democrat	Democrat; some Republican	Democrat	Republican & Democrat
Closely Aligned Think Tank	PNAC; AEI; FDD, Heritage	CSIS; RAND; Hudson; Hoover	Brookings; Carnegie; WINEP	Center for American Progress; Center for a New American Security	CATO; Institute for Policy Studies; Quincy

¹² <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/10/13/toward-a-unified-theory-of-blob-dom/>

¹³ In his book, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (2018), Stephen Walt argues that the pro-interventionist groups and organizations are 'far more numerous, well-funded and influential in Washington than the groups or organizations that favour greater restraint [and] less intervention'. In fact, despite the differences amongst the groups that make up the 'foreign policy community' there is a 'strong consensus supporting the active exercise of American power'. (p. 113)

supporting think-thank networks. (See Table 1.)¹⁴

A view from the parapolitical left

Raso seeks to analyse elite factionalism through the prism of parapolitics and US foreign policy towards the developing world. But Raso does not write as insider, nor is he an established academic or journalist. In the potted biography on the back cover, Raso modestly describes himself as a 'political analyst', and mentions a number of achievements in the educational sphere. However, this does not quite capture the full range and eclectic nature of his background, political sympathies and academic pursuits.

A graduate from the London School of Economics, Raso also carried out additional studies at Loyola University in Chicago. In the late 1990s he was a Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs,¹⁵ a poorly funded Washington DC based think-tank devoted to promoting 'the common interests of the hemisphere, raise the visibility of regional affairs, and increase the importance of constructive inter-American relationships'. During his time there Raso published short pieces on Uruguay¹⁶ and Bolivia,¹⁷ highlighting in each case US complicity in training those military leaders who had wreaked havoc in those countries.

Raso's bio also mentions having lectured at Australian universities, and he was for a time a PhD student at Macquarie University in Sydney. Following that he published an article critical of US policy towards Colombia in *Arena Magazine* (Feb-Mar 2001), an Australian Marxist publication. The PhD appears to be unfinished, as he left Australia to take up a position teaching political science and international relations at McMaster University in Canada. He received a teaching award from the McMaster Student Union in 2004, in his final year there. Raso's resumé also includes an undetermined period of time – presumably in the early 2000s – as a columnist for a Guatemalan newspaper, *El Siglo*.

For those familiar with, if not intimately engaged with the left-wing politics of the early post-Cold War era, Raso's resumé seems to fit a particular mould. Indeed, had he continued on this path, one might expect his name to have

¹⁴ In Raphael BenLevi, 'How Competing Schools of Grand Strategy Shape America's Nonproliferation Policy Toward Iran', in *Texas National Security Review*, Summer 2022. <<https://tinyurl.com/yc8czrr8>> or <<https://tnsr.org/2022/04/how-competing-schools-of-grand-strategy-shape-americas-nonproliferation-policy-toward-iran/>>

¹⁵ <<https://coha.org/about-coha/>>

¹⁶ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20000925201549/http://coha.org/opeds/arch/dwar.html>>

¹⁷ <<https://shorturl.at/ryOX7>> or <https://web.archive.org/web/20000925201545/http://coha.org/opeds/bolivian_elections.html>

cropped up as a radical Latin American specialist or even a full-time political activist. Instead, though, it seems that 9/11 took our author in a different direction. In 2005 Raso became, by his own admission,¹⁸ one of the earliest full members of Scholars for 9/11 Truth (founded in 2005) and a member of Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice since its inception. In what appears to be his sole essay on the topic,¹⁹ written in 2006, Raso asserted that the events of 9/11 were clearly 'a covert operation . . . a false-flag attack orchestrated by elements within and associated with the U.S. state'. The 9/11 attack, he asserted, was a *coup d'état*, but one that was both 'domestic and international', where there had been 'a violent takeover by neoconservative fascist elements in the "national security" apparatus of the state'.²⁰

This conspiratorial outlook appears to have also shaped his role as the Director of Resources for Political Change (RPC),²¹ a now long defunct website for disseminating information aimed at fostering 'political change' deemed 'essential for the preservation of the planet'. The RPC, though, had a particular view on what types of information were needed:

Positive change is impossible, however, without an engaged public that understands the *role of covert activity by the state* in the service of destructive political and economic power beyond transparent democratic control. Only *exposure of the truth in these matters* will allow us to avert a fascist future while preserving liberty and providing the foundation for an end to permanent war. (Emphases added.)

The RPC, 'in addition to examining post-9/11 political developments', also offered 'resources on parapolitics and deep politics'. The link between this earlier work and his current book is Raso's confidence in the model of 'deep politics' as developed by Canadian scholar and former diplomat Peter Dale Scott. For the RPC Raso drew on Scott's book *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*

¹⁸ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080404192641/http://www.resourcespc.org/about.htm>>

¹⁹ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20081009075821/http://www.resourcespc.org/911coup.htm>>

²⁰ Raso's comments on articles at OpEd News show that he remains skeptical of the official 9/11 narrative. In 2018 Raso revealed he had been 'disappointed' by Chris Hedges 'unhelpful', ridiculing of '9/11 "conspiracy theorists"'. See his comment on the article at <<https://shorturl.at/ixGO0>> or <https://www.opednews.com/populum/page.php?f=Scum-vs-Scum-by-Chris-Hedges-Corporate_Democrats_Election_Fascism-181105-638.html>. And, also that year, he expressed mystification at prolific 9/11 author David Ray Griffin's enthusiasm for Rachel Maddow and other MSNBC personalities given 'their participation in the 9/11 coverup.' See his comment on the article at <<https://shorturl.at/tADF9>> or <https://www.opednews.com/populum/page.php?f=Fake-News-9-11-and-MSNBC-by-David-Ray-Griffin-911_Chris-Hayes_Rachel-Maddow-181020-903.html>

²¹ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080404192641/http://www.resourcespc.org/about.htm>>

(1993). Now, in this new book, Raso argues that the concept of 'deep politics', as Scott had articulated it in *The Road to 9/11* (2007), has 'exposed the serious limitations of more conventional approaches to the study of US politics'. (p. 11) 'Deep politics' involves the study of the 'deep state' – the 'military and intelligence apparatus' – and its connections to the 'overworld' represented by the oligarchs and the various institutions they control and other representatives, who are tools for influencing government. This approach, Raso contends, 'offers a superior understanding of political developments'. (p. 12) In short, Raso offers a parapolitical study of the elite factionalism from the viewpoint of the left.

The factions of the overworld

This background would suggest that Raso is a true outsider, devoid of institutional affiliations – someone who has deviated from the left-wing consensus with his views on 9/11 and has embraced parapolitics as the best approach for understanding US politics. And in his book Raso goes some way to doing that, by providing extended summaries of the various domestic and international think-tanks and media organizations that represent each faction, with a particular focus on the various oligarchs who fund them. For the general reader there is much to learn from Raso's book, at least on that topic. But in a number of other areas Raso's otherwise worthy and detailed effort falls short.

First, the book suffers from a stilted structure that actually limits its explanatory power. Raso does not offer a chronological parapolitical history of the competing oligarchic factions. Instead, he gives more of a compendium of the various institutions which make up the two factions, followed by some examples of factional differences as supposedly played out through foreign policy and domestic political disputes. The first two chapters describe the domestic and international organizations that make up the liberal faction; while the third and fourth chapters detail the institutions of the conservative faction. The fifth chapter looks how the two factions have affected US foreign policy, using examples of US intervention in the developing world during the Cold War, while the final chapter examines factional conflicts from the 1990s through to the present day.

This structure almost seems like a post-graduate thesis, and would probably work as a dissertation or monograph, except that at least two important chapters are clearly missing: the literature review and a detailed dissection of the ideologies of the two factions. Given that Raso's book seems to be intended for popular (rather than academic or specialist) consumption, the absence of the literature review probably makes sense. But the failure to include a chapter looking in more detail at the ideologies of the two factions is a

major oversight and it creates problems throughout the rest of the book.

In chapters 1 and 2, for example, we are told that the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Brookings Institution, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Aspen Institute, Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, and so on are all part of the 'liberal' Establishment. But Raso fails to explain why they are 'liberal' and often engages in circular reasoning, with the presence of CFR members being proof an organization is 'liberal' because, of course, the CFR is 'liberal'. Bilderberg, for example, is 'liberal' because 'CFR members and leaders have dominated the US section of Bilderberg from the outset'. (p. 76)

The CFR would be more accurately described as an 'internationalist' policy-making organization, rather than a monolithic institution that belongs to the 'liberal' faction as defined by Raso. Historically the CFR has brought the competing factions in US foreign policy establishment together to forge a consensus on what America's global role should be. Of course, this consensus building was not all-encompassing: isolationists, anti-interventionists, and leftist opponents of US imperialism were not welcome. To be sure, some of the leading proponents of those opposing views have been invited to speak at CFR events over the decades, but they have been treated more like captive specimens than fellow-travellers. Raso, though, having declared the CFR to be the 'principal think tank of the liberal power elite' (p. 14) falls into the conspiracists' trap of counting every CFR member as a 'liberal'.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this is Raso's treatment of the neoconservatives, who are dismissed as a mere 'clique' who collectively fall 'short of faction status' because of their narrow focus on foreign policy. (p. 7) Given that the neo-cons emerged as critics of liberal domestic policy, this might be a surprise to its founding members. In his analysis of the CFR's role in the invasion of Iraq, Raso seems to think the CFR membership of many of the signatories of the Project for a New American Century was more important than the actual ideology they articulated. He also ignores the fact that they organized themselves through bodies other than the CFR, such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) – an organisation to which he attributes no role in supporting either the neo-con faction or the invasion of Iraq. CFR memberships made the invasion a 'liberal' project, even though, at the same time, Raso acknowledges that the neoconservative preference for unilateralism 'clash[ed] with the multilateralism favored by the liberal power elite'. (p. 42)

Second, when it comes to distilling the foreign policy differences between 'liberal' and 'conservative' factions, Raso erroneously presents this as a relatively new phenomenon, that began to gestate in the 1950s, until reaching its apotheosis in the 1980s, when a profusion of avowedly right-wing think-

tanks and policy-planning institutions emerged. (The rise of this network was covered in Blumenthal's *Rise of the Counter-Establishment*.) To suggest this somehow represented a new phenomenon is to paper over the long-standing consequential differences within the US elite. Indeed, a closer study of history shows the division with the US power-elite, over America's global role, predates even the regional power shift identified by Quigley, Sale and Oglesby.

As I noted in my piece on elite disunity,²² there was a split apparent in the aftermath of the World War One between 'conservative' and 'liberal' internationalists, then all largely based on the East Coast. As followers of Woodrow Wilson, the liberals believed in the US as a global *hegemon*, bringing peace and democracy, through its leading role in the League of Nations. The 'conservative internationalists', in contrast, though keen to see the US as a global power, had little tolerance for diluting that emerging strength in nascent international forums such as the League. The economic shift of the 1950s and the Cold War may have breathed more life into the conservative internationalist cause, but it did not start then.

Third, in Chapter 5, Raso makes the rather odd choice to illustrate the differences between the two factions by analysing which US interventions each faction supported in the Third World during the Cold War. Thus, when the 'liberal' faction intervened to overthrow the Marxist/Socialist governments in Guatemala and Chile, they were motivated by 'transnational corporate interests'; while the 'conservative' factions support for anti-Communist 'freedom fighters' in Nicaragua and Angola in the 1980s was driven in large part by that faction's 'ideological anti-communism'. (p. 184) There were factional differences over these interventions, though Raso does not really explore them. For example, as he said in letter to a Congressional committee, David Rockefeller opposed US support to the UNITA rebels in Angola, on the grounds that it would 'needlessly endanger American lives and American property' in Angola – which had become one of the largest and best economic partners for the US in Africa.²³

It would have made more sense to explore how the different factions viewed the US role in the world, rather than to revisit the slight (alleged) differences in the *motivation* behind their targeting of Marxist/Socialist regimes in the Third World. The 'liberal' faction, for example, sought a world where US power was embedded in a network of multilateral economic and security institutions, providing both legitimacy and longevity; while the 'conservative'

²² See footnote 10.

²³ *Washington Post*, 26 November 1985. See <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000604900062-8.pdf>>.

factions were more devoted to a unipolar world order, with the US as the global *hegemon*, unrestrained by international law and institutions; or, if they were from the *realpolitik* faction, as the *hegemon* in a complex multipolar world order of balancing alliances.

Also interesting is Raso's approach to conspiracist allegations about the machinations of the 'Deep State' at key points in recent American history. When addressing issues such as the JFK assassination and 9/11, Raso pulls his punches. In the single paragraph on the JFK assassination, for instance, Raso avoids taking a clear position, although he refers to the 'infamous single-bullet theory' and quotes a criticism of the *Warren Commission Report*. (pp. 28-29) As for 9/11, gone are Raso's confident accusations from 2006 claiming a 'covert operation' by government elements, working at the behest of 'neo-conservative fascists'. Instead, Raso tepidly observes that the *9/11 Commission Report* has been 'heavily criticized by a wide range of researchers and experts'. (p. 89) It is only in Chapter 6, which looks at examples of factional conflict from the 1990s, that Raso commits to a clear position, claiming that both the Clinton and Trump Administrations were respectively targeted by the conservative and liberal oligarchical factions. Although, in the case of Trump, Raso stops short of directly accusing the 'liberal power elite' of having concocted the Russiagate narrative, but he quotes from plenty of analysts who think it did. (pp. 228-231)

But these are minor quibbles in a book that at least attempts to analyse the elite factions that transcend the two-party system in the US and – at the same time – show how the oligarchic interests actually dominate the US political system. For that reason alone, the book is of considerable value and the general reader can learn a lot from it. This is particularly true when it comes to how US democracy has long been compromised by powerful interest groups. Raso shows how they organize themselves, not just through lobbying organizations, but also through policy-planning institutions and other exclusive cliques, to shape and influence government. And he demonstrates that they do this not just from the outside but also, more importantly, from within.

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