

George W. Carey

## Irreconcilable Differences?

*The Right War? The Conservative Debate on Iraq.*  
Edited by Gary Rosen. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

The debates surrounding the Iraq war have served to widen a chasm among those on the political Right. Some idea of just how wide this chasm presently is can be gleaned from a recent *National Review* cover essay by the neoconservative David Frum, “Unpatriotic Conservatives: A War Against America,” which was composed shortly before our invasion of Iraq. Frum there took “antiwar conservatives” to task, suggesting even that they were aiding and abetting America’s enemies. He also contended that such “isolationists” lacked genuine conservative roots. His charges did not go unanswered, nor were they unmet with countercharges—with the result that the divisions on the Right are now so wide that each side is questioning the conservative *bona fides* of the other.

I mention this at the outset because it forms a useful background for assessing this collection of essays, whose purpose is to survey the frequently ignored “internecine battles” on the Right where, as Gary Rosen would have it, we find not only the most ardent advocates of the Bush Doctrine but also the most trenchant critics of the Iraq war. To this end, the selections have been “drawn from...leading newspapers” and “opinion magazines” where “conservative

thought is welcome.” The collection consists of twenty-two articles, arranged chronologically, that appeared between February 2004 and February 2005, a time frame justified on grounds that “it provides at least middling distance from the overheated polemical atmosphere” which marked the war’s beginning.

Rosen finds three relatively distinct conservative groups engaged in an “intramural debate” over the war, the Bush Doctrine, and more generally, America’s role in the world: (1) the “neoconservatives” who have played a major role in formulating Bush’s foreign policy, (2) the “realists” who place a premium on peace and stability and are largely content to operate within the world as it is, and (3) the “isolationists” on the far right, who, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, embraced “a long-dormant strain of conservative foreign-policy thought.” The “realist” category, as it turns out, is a catchall, embracing a wide variety of criticisms that vary in scope. Moreover, not all of the “realists” are, by any measure, conservatives.

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Rosen's selections offer viewpoints that are scarcely new to those who have followed the controversies surrounding our involvement in Iraq, but there is an imbalance, with neoconservative arguments accorded disproportionate space. There are, for example, two substantial articles by Victor Davis Hanson, and Norman Podhoretz's "World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win" runs sixty-nine pages, comprising a full quarter of the volume. Indeed, one might consider this collection merely a vehicle for reproducing Podhoretz's work, particularly since it falls in the middle, surrounded by considerably shorter articles of far narrower scope. Nevertheless, this imbalance can be justified on grounds that Podhoretz presents in an uncompromising fashion the most comprehensive justification for the Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War. From his vantage point, the war in Iraq is but a skirmish in the context of a far graver threat to Western civilization. Our enemy, he insists, as even the attacks on American forces and facilities preceding 9/11 make clear, is "radical Islamism," and the objective of this "new enemy" is "not merely to murder as many of us as possible and to conquer our land" but, "[l]ike the Nazis and Communists before him," to destroy "everything good for which American stands." In the course of developing this thesis, Podhoretz expounds on four "pillars" of the Bush Doctrine, including a defense of "pre-emptive war," while castigating the critics of the war both Left and Right. Those seeking a detailed picture of the neoconservative position will find it here.

For the most part, the contributions of other neoconservatives complement Podhoretz's arguments, though a number deal with more specific criticisms directed at the American commitment in Iraq. It would appear to be the aftershock of David Kay's failure to find weapons of mass destruction

that prompted Robert Kagan and William Kristol to justify our invasion on grounds of the potential threat posed by Saddam and then to provide new rationales for the war: "It is also becoming clear that the battle of Iraq has been an important victory in the broader war in which we are engaged, a war against terror, against weapons proliferation, and for a new Middle East." Other neoconservatives, such as Hanson and Max Boot, by way of answering critics, argue that if we take history as our guide things are not going badly in Iraq; greater patience is called for.

The critics of the war are less uniform. Most hold that the objectives of Bush's policies are justifiable, but that ignorance, miscalculations, or ideology have blocked their realization. Such would seem to be the case with Fareed Zakaria, Fouad Ajami, Eliot A. Cohen, and David Brooks, among others. The editors of *National Review*, who fall into this category, put their objections bluntly: "There probably weren't enough troops. The administration probably wasn't determined enough to get international help, even on its own terms.... The administration clearly wasn't ready for the magnitude of the task that rebuilding and occupying Iraq would present." Having said this, the *National Review* editors, like most who see similar shortcomings, caution that "[a]llowing radicals to prevail there would be a sharp setback in the War on Terror." They pin their hopes on an orderly withdrawal from a stable, but not necessarily democratic, Iraq. Yet others who acknowledge mistakes in the execution of the war contend that we are obliged to stay the course and achieve our original goals. Andrew Sullivan, for instance, takes the editors of *National Review* to task, arguing that their "skepticism and realism" should have led them to oppose the "intervention in the first place—as the Buchanan brigades averred." His article is titled "Quitters."

George Will points to a basic issue that in my view has irreparably divided the Right. There was a time, he writes, when the question of “our ability to wield political power to produce requisite cultural change in a place such as Iraq...would have separated conservatives from liberals.” “Nowadays,” he continues, “it separates conservatives from neoconservatives.” So much is clearly evident in the three relatively expansive and thoughtful articles from Patrick Buchanan’s *American Conservative*, each presenting different perspectives (none of them “isolationist”) on why the war is a mistake that will turn out badly. James Kurth maintains that “the war policy of the Bush administration represents a radical abandonment of traditional American ways of dealing with the world, ways that overall have served the United States very well.” After surveying the successes and failures of our past efforts to democratize nations, Kurth concludes that not only is the American effort in Iraq bound to fail, it will prove counterproductive by serving to “discredit similar...efforts elsewhere.” Owen Harries directly assails the “unilateralism” of the Bush Doctrine and the “ideology” of the neoconservatives. He emphasizes as well that democratic institutions cannot “be exported and transplanted to societies that have no experience of them,” and that, “[t]o be viable, political institutions and political cultures require a long, organic, indigenous growth.” He believes this essential truth is disparaged by neoconservatives, who look upon it “as defeatist, an elaborate rationalization for doing nothing.” Finally, Andrew J. Bacevich, foreseeing “a deeply unsatisfactory denouement” to the war, offers up ten lessons we should learn from our experience. The first of these, seemingly directed to the neoconservatives, is that “mixing utopianism and politics is a recipe for miscalculation and an invitation to strategic bankruptcy....” What is more, in his

view, “the current foreign-policy elite” no longer exhibits the “balanced sensibility, anchored in considerations of prudence” that has, with few exceptions, shaped our policies from George Washington’s time. Taken together, these articles—written from a perspective not unlike that which David Frum attacked so vehemently—present a comprehensive case against allowing ideological goals to dictate foreign policy.

With this brief survey before us, what can be said of this collection? To begin with, there is little question that far more comprehensive and weightier collections dealing with the pros and cons of the Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War will soon appear. This volume will be quickly superseded. Beyond this, while it does present a range of thoughtful views on the Iraq War and concerns raised by the Bush Doctrine, it falls far short of canvassing *all* the critical issues that divide the Right, particularly those that have aroused the most intense feelings.

From the time it was first set forth, for example, many conservatives of the more traditional school have had severe reservations and doubts about President Bush’s version of the preventive war doctrine advanced to justify the Iraq War. Many have argued that the traditional standards necessary for the initiation of a preventive war were simply not met, thereby setting a precedent for unwarranted wars in the future. For these conservatives, curtailing the weapons inspections by the United Nations, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, and the subsequent metamorphoses of the war’s stated objectives are among the evidences of our failure to meet just-war standards.

This concern is closely related to another that has deeply divided the Right, namely, whether the Bush administration manipulated intelligence to secure both congress-

sional and popular support for the war. Throughout the period covered in this volume, and well before, many conservatives in both the libertarian and traditionalist camps had come to conclude that this was indeed the case. This conclusion, in turn, has lent support to the argument that the Bush administration almost immediately after 9/11 had irrevocably made up its mind to invade Iraq. Experience has shown that presidents—of both parties—find it very difficult not to dissemble in matters of war. This raises important constitutional questions concerning the war power and congressional oversight. How exactly *has* it come to pass that after World War II America has prosecuted numerous wars without formal declarations by Congress? How is it that conservatives, who are otherwise so devoted to the original intent of our constitutional arrangements, view such an apparent abuse of constitutional powers with equanimity? These and like issues that have been the source of intense controversy on the Right are largely absent from this volume.

In characterizing the Right's differences over the Iraq war as an "intramural debate," Rosen holds out hope that these dif-

ferences might eventually be resolved, after some spirited give and take, within the context of shared core values. This might conceivably be the case with, say, Charles Krauthammer and Francis Fukuyama, whose debate over the viability of "democratic realism" forms part of this collection—but not with a significant portion of those antiwar conservatives who show a sensitivity to the teachings of Burke. These teachings inform them that societies are both fragile and complex, that they cannot, like watches, be taken apart and put together again. From the outset, therefore, these traditionalists could imagine—as apparently the architects of the Iraq War could not—the enormous complexities and costs involved in regime change. Their sensibilities dictated that such tasks should be undertaken only if absolutely necessary. Their worldview, their understanding of the nature of man and society, in other words, seems to be alien to the democratic globalists who played a major role in conceiving the Iraq War. Yet, as important as this realization is to an understanding of why the Right's divisions over this war are irreconcilable, we do not learn it from this collection.