



Divided They Stand

(Published in the [American Enterprise Institute](#), Book Reviews: The Right War?: The Conservative Debate on Iraq Edited by Gary Rosen. (Cambridge University Press, 254 pp, \$65) Beware the Arafat Model in Iraq September 28, 2005)

[David Frum](#)

Reseña n° 50

October 5, 2005

It's no secret that conservatives have divided ferociously over the decision to go to war to topple Saddam. The dispute was evident early on, when the national security adviser to the first President Bush, Adm. Brent Scowcroft, published an article in *The Wall Street Journal* attacking the foreign policy of his former boss's son, the second President Bush--and also of his own favorite protégée, Condoleezza Rice.

The divisions haven't healed since. Lining up behind Gen. Scowcroft is a battalion of former ambassadors and uniformed military men, of Republican lobbyists and business executives. And cheering them on is a small but noisy coterie of neoisola-

tionist writers who have effectively depicted George W. Bush's foreign policy as the work of a cabal of secretive "neoconservatives."

To illuminate this debate Gary Rosen has gathered articles from conservative magazines and journals, some fully approving of the war and its execution, some mildly critical, some harshly so. Among the volume's two-dozen commentators are Robert Kagan, Norman Podhoretz, Eliot Cohen, Andrew Basevich, George Will, Andrew Sullivan, Dimitri Simes and Patrick Buchanan. For continuity and timeliness Mr. Rosen has limited his selection to writings from 2004-05, after the "initial volleys of opinion" had

ended and the war was well under way.

Without a doubt *The Right War?* makes a valuable contribution both to intellectual history and to the battle of ideas that is still raging in the nation's op-ed pages. But the book is a much more ambitious project than it might immediately appear. The debate over the Iraq War is not ultimately a debate over Iraq. It is a debate over the whole shape and content of American policy in the Middle East.

Those Republicans who opposed the Iraq War certainly believed that Iraq was not a sufficient threat to American security to require military action. But that is only the beginning of what they believed. Many have been appalled by the whole course of U.S. policy since 9/11 and only grudgingly accepted the intervention in Afghanistan.

As they saw it, the fundamental cause of the rise of anti-American extremism in the Muslim world has been the increasingly visible American presence in the region since 1990--and the best response to terrorism would have been a quick thrashing of the Taliban followed by a swift lowering of the American profile and a conspicuous return to work on the Palestinian problem. Many of these critics may personally doubt that the Palestinian problem can ever be solved. But they know that every hour of presidential time devoted to the Palestinians is an hour that won't be used to embarrass or inconvenience the Saudis, the Egyptians and other powers

whom they regard as American allies or potential allies.

Thus to examine the conservative debate by referring to Iraq alone is to risk misunderstanding the most serious arguments of the war's opponents. Mr. Rosen notes in his thoughtful introduction that much of the writing about Iraq has been "irresponsible" and "hysterical." *The Right War?* high-mindedly excludes this material. But this high-mindedness risks distorting the historical record.

Omit the accusations that the war was a Jewish plot foisted on a stupid president by scheming neoconservatives and you omit something important about the mental atmosphere in which the intramural conservative debate over Iraq has been conducted. The article by Mr. Buchanan that appears in *The Right War?* is a relatively anodyne one. But he also wrote this, in the March 23, 2003, issue of the American Conservative: "Cui Bono? For whose benefit these endless wars in a region that holds nothing vital to America save oil, which the Arabs must sell us to survive? Who would benefit from a war of civilizations between the West and Islam? Answer: one nation, one leader, one party. Israel, Sharon, Likud." This line of thinking can be found only a little way below the surface among some of the most respectable war opponents.

The Right War? points to another aspect of the Iraq debate: the growing difficulty of defining who counts as a "conservative" in foreign policy and who does not. The Iraq

War has unsettled everybody's mental map of American politics. You hear Democrats warning that Arabs are culturally unready for democracy and Republicans thundering against the isolationists of the 1930s. Two out of the three senior editors of *The American Conservative* magazine voted against President Bush--and the three owners of the liberal *New Republic* almost certainly all voted for him.

Meanwhile many critics of the Iraq War insist that those who support the war are not "conservatives" at all but risk-taking Jacobins. They point to President Bush's often startling speeches, which have criticized Western governments, including presumably the U.S. government,

for 60 years of "excusing tyranny in the region, hoping to purchase stability at the price of liberty." Yet if this kind of idealistic talk excommunicates George W. Bush from the church of conservatism, it likewise must bar Ronald Reagan, who spoke the same language.

In politics, nothing lasts forever. Just as Pearl Harbor brought down the curtain on American isolationism for decades to come, so 9/11 seems to have discredited sentimental liberal multilateralism. What remains is a debate among forms of conservatism. This debate is encapsulated in Mr. Rosen's timely, intelligently selected and highly recommended book.

[David Frum](#) is a resident fellow at AEI.



<http://www.aei.org/>