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Daniel Larison EUNOMIA
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Iraq, Republicans and Conservatives

Posted on April 12th, 2010 by Daniel Larison



Either way, however, the extraordinary salience of partisan identity leads me to believe that things like George Will's op-ed calling for withdrawal for Afghanistan and a recent admission from Reps. Rohrabacher and McClintock that "almost all" their Republican colleagues on the Hill think the Iraq War was a mistake are **hugely important developments** [bold mine-DL].

There needs to be room for conservatives and Republicans to believe that it is okay for "people like us" to hold antiwar beliefs. But as long as the public face of opposition to the war remains Nancy Pelosi and Code Pink, many conservatives and Republicans seem likely to continue in their passionate support for the wars. ~[Justin Logan](#)

Via [Scobleizer](#)

Are these hugely important developments? As I have said before, George Will [isn't taking an antiwar position](#). He wants to extricate us from "nation-building" and replace a population-centered counterinsurgency with frequent use of air strikes and special ops teams. If that means more instability in the region and more dead Afghan civilians, well, those are the breaks. The result of this would be to continue to keep the American costs of meddling interventionism relatively low in order to make it possible to intervene more frequently in the future. Will's call for withdrawal from Afghanistan does not tell us that he will oppose the next bipartisan consensus-backed war fever, and indeed there is nothing in his record that suggests that he would.

As much as I would like to believe that what Rohrabacher and McClintock are [saying](#) means something, even if the claim is true it has had almost no effect on the foreign policy thinking of most Republican members of Congress *even as it relates to Iraq*. Noah Millman [described](#)

three groups of conservative Republican war supporters who have since come to the conclusion that the war was a mistake:

In my experience, conservatives who have changed their mind fall into three broad camps: minimizers, avoiders, and abandoners. Minimizers admit the war didn't work out as planned, but spend their energies on damage control – arguing that intentions were good, or that knowledge was limited, or that some aspects did work out, or whatever. **Avoiders show signs that they know the whole enterprise was rotten to the core – so they avoid the topic and avoid drawing any broader conclusions about, well, anything from the fiasco of Iraq** [bold mine-DL]. And abandoners, well, they feel obliged, when they face the depth of their mistake, to abandon their political home altogether, either for the other side or for a relatively un-engaged posture.

In other words, there's a general sense among conservative thinkers that the die was cast long ago: within the context of the conservative political world, **it is not an option to seriously rethink the decision for war** [bold mine-DL]. Doing so is tantamount to abandoning their political identity. Why that is, I'm not sure, though I suspect guilt has more to do with it than anything.

Aside from a few other members who I think may have genuinely come to see and really understand their error of supporting the war, such as Walter Jones and Dana Rohrabacher, we do not see the recognition of the “terrible mistake” translating into any re-thinking of any policy. If most Republican members of Congress now believe that the Iraq war was a “terrible mistake,” they have since become minimizers or avoiders. As Millman said, there has been no *serious re-thinking*. For his part, Rohrabacher has been a skeptic and critic of administration Afghanistan policy, and he has considerable familiarity with matters of Afghanistan policy, so I don't easily reject what he proposes. What I do want to stress here is how incredibly unrepresentative Rohrabacher and those few other Republicans are when it comes to taking public policy positions at odds with the prevailing view inside the party.

As Millman suggests, support for the Iraq war has become an important part of modern conservative, and I would add Republican partisan, political identity. The Iraq war produced “the most polarized distribution of partisan opinions on a president and a war ever measured,” as Gary Jacobson says. The strong identification of conservatives and Republicans with the Iraq war was at first a point of pride and then a source of increasingly defensive self-justification as the vast majority of the country turned against the war and against conservatives and the GOP. Even if most Republican members of Congress recognize that the war was a “terrible mistake,” they refuse to acknowledge publicly that their support for the war and public discontent with the war were responsible for costing them their majorities in Congress. That tells me that even as a matter of crude electoral calculations the Congressional GOP has learned nothing. As a practical matter, mass Congressional Republican recognition of the error of invading Iraq has not led to any significant political or policy changes. As far as most Republican voters and conservatives are still concerned, “people like us” do not oppose foreign wars, and they especially don't oppose the Iraq war in any meaningful way, and one reason for this is that the *public* face of opposition simply does not include mainstream Republicans, much less Republicans in any position of leadership or influence.

Filed under: [foreign policy](#), [politics](#)

2 Responses to “Iraq, Republicans and Conservatives”

1. **cfountain72**, on [April 12th, 2010 at 4:01 pm](#) Said:

Good piece. Sadly, as you've alluded to, for too many folks it's simply red team/blue team politics. “Bush was my guy (the kind of guy you'd most like to have a drink with, if he still drank), so it must've been a good war! Obama's a bad guy, so if Obama's for endin' the war, it must be bad!”

At this point, we've really reached a disturbing stage of ambivalence in many quarters. A couple of weeks ago, when IM'ing back and forth with a friend (who'd be proud to call himself part of the evangelical right and a supporter of the war), I mentioned another of the many errors inherent in that conflict. He paused and replied back to me, “You know what? You are the **ONLY** person I know who even mentions Iraq anymore.”

The neocons have (sadly) been incredibly successful in tying war to the conservative brand, even though a cursory review of history shows that Democrats have brought us into most of our largest conflicts. At this point, saying conservatives were historically skeptical of war is met with either confusion, mockery, or the ever handy “Have you already forgotten about 9/11?”

Peace be with you.

2. **tbraton**, on [April 13th, 2010 at 11:02 am](#) Said:

I was expressing my opposition to the Iraq War long before it actually started, and I voted for Bush in 2000. What surprised me at the time was not the Republican support for the war, but the Democratic support for the war. As I recall, all the leading Democratic contenders for the Presidential nomination in 2004 (or 2008) voted in support of the war: Kerry, Edwards, Dodd, Liberman, Clinton, Biden, Bayh. This was in stark contrast to the first Gulf War when Democratic opposition to that war was nearly uniform. What I found especially puzzling was that no leading Democratic contender (other than Barack Obama—and who considered him to be a leading contender?) seemed to appreciate the fact that Democratic opposition in 1991 did not prevent the Democrats from winning the Presidency in 1992. In fact, the winner of that election, Bill Clinton, famously straddled the first Gulf War: “I was opposed, but I would have voted for it if I had been in the Senate” or some non-committal nonsense like that. You would have thought that some leading Democrat might have appreciated the possible advantage of opposing the war in the event that the war turned out badly or public opinion about the war were to change, as public opinion often does. As it turned out, only Barack Obama, among those who were to become leading Democratic contenders, voiced opposition to the Iraq War in 2002 (and he wasn't even in the Senate then),

and it can be safely said that without that vocal opposition he never would have defeated Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination in 2008. A few more brains and a lot more cynicism would have paid enormous dividends to the Democratic politician who chose a different path.

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