Iraq, Republicans and Conservatives

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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 Scoblete

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 meddlesome 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.

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