The Washington Times

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Tuesday, June 23, 2009

BOOK REVIEW: It ain't necessarily unnecessary

WAR OF NECESSITY/WAR OF CHOICE: A MEMOIR OF TWO IRAQ WARS

By Richard N. Haass

Simon & Schuster, $27, 352 pages

Reviewed by Douglas J. Feith

What does it mean when a critic, labeling himself a pragmatist, calls a political opponent an ideologue? Usually, not much. The critic is saying he cherishes the sensible practicality of his own views and doesnt respect his opponent's thinking. That tells you more about the critic than about his opponent. Just as people use "mythology" to describe someone else's religion, never their own, they generally identify others, but not themselves, as ideologues.

"Ideologue" commonly gets used in two different ways, both negative. One is to criticize close-minded people - those so wedded to their own preconceptions and preferences that they won't drop or change them even if events contradict them. That's a proper use of the word, I believe.

"Ideologue" is also used to knock people whose approach to public policy is philosophical, conceptual, systematic and strategic. Those who use it this way tend to be more tactical than strategic in their own approach and often boast of their pragmatism as a way of saying "I'm not very liberal or conservative, just practical."

Insulting all systematic approaches to public policy as "ideology" - and all their proponents as "ideologues" - is a mistake. There's a big difference between being a systematic thinker and being close-minded. Some systematic liberal thinkers are open-minded, practical, scientific and scholarly on policy questions, and others are not. The same is true of systematic conservative thinkers. And the same is true also of people in the middle who take relatively liberal positions on some issues and relatively conservative ones on others.

These swing voters are not necessarily any more pragmatic or open-minded on a given issue than those to their left or right. People who position themselves on the political middle ground can be as close-minded - indeed, ideological - on a particular issue as anyone else can be.

In his book "War of Necessity/War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars," Richard N. Haass contrasts the 1990-91 Gulf war with the ongoing Iraq war. He takes pains to present himself as "pragmatic and moderate" - a foreign policy "realist" of the school of President George H.W. Bush and his national security adviser Brent Scowcroft.

During the senior Bush's administration, Mr. Haass worked for Mr. Scowcroft as a policy adviser at the White House in the center of the Iraq action. During the George W. Bush administration, Mr. Haass worked in the State Department where his job was peripheral to Iraq policymaking.

Mr. Haass writes that he supported the Gulf war, believing it to have been a war of necessity, which he defines as an act that is "essentially unavoidable." Such wars, he says, generally involve self-defense, the most important national interests and the absence of promising alternatives to the use of force.

As for the Iraq war, he writes disparagingly of his colleagues in the Bush administration who saw the post-Sept. 11, 2001, threat from Saddam in those very terms - as involving self-defense and dangers to vital U.S. national interests, leaving America without good options short of war. Mr. Haass asserts that those colleagues had an "enthusiasm for going to war" that he didn't share. He says he was "60/40 against initiating a war" to oust Saddam Hussein from power and, if he had known that Iraq did not have stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and that the war would be fought with "a marked absence of good judgment and competence" he would have been "unalterably opposed." He seems unaware of how peculiar it is to declare he would have had an "unalterable" position if he could only have known how the war would play out.

Mr. Haass takes pride in claiming he was the first person in the Iraq war debate to invoke the distinction between a war of necessity and one of choice. (Likewise he calls it "my rule" that, in the Middle East, the enemy of your enemy can still be your enemy - as if no one had previously remarked on that irony.) While the Gulf war was necessary, in Mr. Haass' opinion, the Iraq war was merely a choice.

What quickly becomes obvious in his account of the Gulf war, however, is that the U.S.-led 1991 military action to oust Iraq's invasion force from Kuwait was in fact intensely controversial. Secretary of State James Baker "was more open to a diplomatic outcome." U.S. officials feared that the United Nations would not support an ultimatum to Saddam. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell was "a reluctant warrior." As for the U.S. Congress, Mr. Haass writes: "I remember more than one member of the leadership arguing that we should not run to using force unless we were provoked, a strange argument, I thought, given what Saddam had already done."

Former President Jimmy Carter "was writing the leaders of the other countries then on the U.N. Security Council and advising them not to support us!" And Sen. Sam Nunn "normally something of a hawk," was holding Senate committee hearings in which witness after witness testified "that the misguided policy of the Bush administration would lead to massive American casualties and expensive oil." Most of the witnesses and senators "favored giving sanctions more time to work." Nearly half of Congress opposed going to war. In short, many important actors in the United States and abroad saw the war as unnecessary.

By the end of his Gulf war account, it's impossible to tell whether Mr. Haass thinks the phrase "war of necessity" has any objective meaning at all. The reader is left to conclude that a war of necessity is one the author happens to support, and a war of choice is one he doesn't.

The book's treatment of the current Iraq war is polemical, adding little information or analysis to the existing literature. Mr. Haass recycles the well-known arguments of the war's critics, including some he should know are not correct - for example, that Saddam "had little involvement with terrorism" and that Vice President Dick Cheney "cook[ed] the books" on intelligence about Iraqi WMD.

Bipartisan reports of the Senate Intelligence Committee and other works have so thoroughly debunked those arguments that they can rightly be condemned as ideological: that is, immune to

the facts. But Mr. Haass makes use of this erroneous conventional case against the war to portray his administration colleagues who supported the president on Iraq as "ideological" rather than "pragmatic." In other words, he disagreed with them. His book does little, however, to explain the actual views of the president's supporters and why Mr. Haass thinks they were wrong.

For students of current events and recent history, Mr. Haass' work is, at best, a book of choice, not necessity.

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