

BOOKS

[*Neo-conned! Just War Principles: A Condemnation of War in Iraq*, D.L. O'Huallachain and J. Forrest Sharpe, eds., *Light in the Darkness Publications*, 447 pages]

The Case for Peace

By Daniel McCarthy

FOR SOME TIME NOW, opponents of the Iraq War have needed a concise and sober compendium of the literature against the invasion—an epitome of the antiwar argument that could be given to friends and relatives who have never made up their minds about the conflict, or who once supported it and now have the sneaking suspicion that they were conned.

Neo-conned is not that book, but it is the next best thing. It collects three distinct, but related, kinds of antiwar essays. Its first section examines the events leading up to the invasion in 2003, including the case for the war itself and the effects of 12 years of sanctions. The essays of the second part represent conservative arguments against the war. The third, and largest, component of the book places the Iraq conflict in the context of Catholic just-war tradition. A companion volume, *Neo-Conned Again*, assembles an even wider range of antiwar material, including contributions from prominent leftists like Noam Chomsky.

What prevents *Neo-conned* from being an ideal introduction to conservative and Catholic opposition to the war is that the reader must exercise considerable caution, and a fair amount of skepticism, with some of the essays. The book opens with an extended interview with Jude Wanniski, the trailblazing supply-side economist and conservative

maverick who died last year. Wanniski was a brave, good, and principled man, but he goes too far in the interview—"The (Bogus) Case Against Saddam"—to give the deposed dictator the benefit of the doubt. He is treading on treacherous ground when he claims that Saddam did not gas the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 and did not have genocide in mind with his Anfal campaign against the Kurds. Wanniski has sources for these claims, but readers must be aware that those sources are in the minority and in some cases are ambiguous about their own conclusions. And when Wanniski says of Kuwait's economic policies in the late 1980s, "the life of Iraq was being threatened by the [Kuwaiti] Emir," he comes dangerously close to justifying Saddam's aggression.

Jude Wanniski was no Saddamite, but he was an arch-contrarian, and supporters of the Iraq War have found it easy to paint him as a kook. Unprepared readers who repeat his arguments will open themselves to embarrassment. What is perhaps just as bad, embarrassed readers might be inclined to dismiss all of what Wanniski says—even though there can be no disputing many of the instances of U.S. and Kuwaiti government duplicity he recites. The daughter of Kuwait's then-ambassador to the U.S. did indeed lie to Congress in 1990 when she claimed to be a simple nurse who had witnessed Iraqi soldiers throwing Kuwaiti babies out of incubators. And photographs taken (and sold commercially) by Soviet satellites that year actually do show that Saddam's forces were not massing for an invasion of Saudi Arabia—leaving Pentagon spokesman Bob Hall to claim, "They—the Iraqi troops—are there. We would like it to remain a mystery what our intelligence capabilities are. We are not going to make our intelligence public," which certainly sounds suspicious in light of later intelligence frauds used to justify Middle Eastern wars.

Immediately after Wanniski's essay comes one even more problematic: a Shi'ite ex-Ba'athist's account of Saddam's generous treatment of the writer's

co-religionists. Muhammad al-Bagh-dadi's argument, such as it is, consists of listing various state offices under Saddam Hussein that were occupied by Shi'ites. He also tells us that Saddam gave state cars to certain Shi'ite clerics. Even assuming this is true, none of it is germane to the claims adduced by the war's supporters—and not just supporters—to show that Saddam persecuted the Shi'ites. Their charges rest less on how many Shi'ites Saddam did or did not employ than on the facts of his forcible suppression of pilgrimages, his assassination of clerics like Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, and the murder of other Shi'ites for religious-political reasons. Again, the unwary or uninformed reader risks being led astray.

That the two most problematic pieces in the collection come within its first 90 pages seriously compromises *Neo-conned*. What follows, however, more than compensates for the defects of those early pages. Rounding out the first section of the book are Patrick Buchanan's essay "Whose War," originally published in *TAC*, and two articles detailing the consequences of the economic sanctions leveled against Iraq beginning in 1990. Of the latter, "The Real 'Oil-for-Food' Scandal" by Joy Gordon, reprinted from *Harper's*, is especially valuable.

Professor Gordon's article by itself comes close to justifying the book's cover price; she presents a compelling argument that the sanctions, which cost the lives of over 200,000 Iraqi children between 1990 and 1998 according to the most reliable estimates, were "themselves a form of violence ... they cannot legitimately be seen merely as a peace-keeping device, or as a tool for enforcing international law." The Pentagon knew from the start what effect the sanctions would have. Gordon cites a Defense Department report that noted, "[d]egraded medical conditions in Iraq are primarily attributable to the breakdown of public services (water purification and distribution, transportation). ... Hospital care is degraded by lack of running water and electricity," all caused or

greatly exacerbated by the sanctions. She compares this to siege warfare:

Siege has the character of being a form of warfare which itself constitutes a war crime. By its very nature, it is easily foreseeable or calculated to cause *direct* harm to those who are, in just-war doctrine, supposed to be exempt from warfare—the apolitical and unarmed—in order to influence *indirectly* those who are armed and those who are responsible for military and political decisions.

The next set of essays, seven in number, come chiefly from traditionalist conservative critics of the Iraq War, including the late Sam Francis, Joseph Sobran, Thomas Fleming, and Paul Gottfried. The agrarian Wendell Berry also features here, arguing that the U.S. economy is “a war economy—an economy, one might justly say, of general violence.” “The free market,” contends

Berry, “is [becoming] less and less distinguishable from warfare.” Coming after Gordon’s carefully argued critique of sanctions, Berry’s assertions read almost like a parody—don’t look to his contribution for a thoughtful, or even polemical, discussion of the military-industrial complex. He contents himself with railing against capitalism in the abstract, and by conflating capitalism with war he plays into the worst stereotypes about the antiwar Left. It’s an unfortunate misfire.

Paul Gottfried’s “A Conservative War?” provides the crux of this section. Gottfried questions how a war aimed at democratization and the total transformation of a foreign land’s culture and politics can in any sense be considered conservative. “Attempts to preserve a customary way of life against outside threats, and to resist violence directed against persons and property fit the definition of a conservative war,” he says, and nothing of the sort was at stake in Iraq. In this, he is surely correct. But Gottfried’s explanation for the mislabeling of the war leaves something to be desired: “What makes it ‘conservative’ is where its advocates”—neoconservatives, that is—“are positioned.” The mainstream media, according to Gottfried, is happy to let neoconservatives stand in for genuine conservatives, who in many cases “can hurt themselves [professionally] by disagreeing with neoconservative censors; and since the war has become a *test* of conservative and Republican loyalties, those who *depend* on the party or the movement may try not to seem out of step.”

All true, yet Gottfried discounts the sheer number of self-identified conservatives—grassroots as well as inside-the-Beltway—who supported the war without any prompting from “neoconservative censors.” Whatever their reasons—reflexive partisanship, gung-ho nationalism, a residual Cold War ideological commitment to democracy—most ordinary conservatives found this war readily compatible with their beliefs. This is a great shame to all of us who call ourselves conservatives, but

there is no denying the fact. The rot runs deeper than neoconservatism.

By far the greatest part of *Neoconned*, more than half of the book, is devoted to measuring the Iraq War against the standards of just-war doctrine, in most chapters from an explicitly Catholic perspective. These essays are the most compelling in the book, which is no slight to the preceding material. Contributions come from laymen, clergy, former soldiers, academics, and others, they add up to the most thorough exposition of the Catholic antiwar position that has yet been published, or is likely to be published for some time. The just-war teachings of the Church, moreover, should not only be of interest to Catholics; these precepts have developed over more than a thousand years of conscientious criticism of war both in theory and practice. Even readers with no religious leanings can profit from studying this tradition.

Fr. Juan Carlos Iscara’s essay offers a primer on just-war teachings. The piece that follows, by Professor Thomas Ryba of Purdue University, is an advanced course, scrutinizing the different varieties of just-war theory expounded by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and later Thomists on the one hand and the more probabilistic—and permissive—interpretation of just-war doctrine promulgated by Francisco Suarez and more modern thinkers. The rigorous standards of the earlier school can be seen in the words of the 16th-century Thomist Dominicus Bañez: “the state that wishes to declare war must not entertain a single doubt, the justifying reasons must be clearer than day. A declaration of war is equivalent to a sentence of death; to pronounce the latter with a doubtful conscience is murder.” For his part, Ryba argues for an even more restrictive, nearly pacifistic, standard on epistemological grounds.

Other contributors sketch the limits of the state’s sovereign authority in war, refute the just-war arguments made by supporters of the Iraq invasion, assess the justice of new technologies (and ideologies) of war, and defend conscien-

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tious objection—even for soldiers on active duty. The writers are not afraid to highlight the tensions between being a Catholic and being an American; indeed, William Cavanaugh, associate professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, suggests that the failure on the part of many American Catholics to take just-war teachings seriously arises from “a fundamental inability of many U.S. Catholics and other Christians to imagine being out of step with the American nation-state. It should not be so difficult to suppose that the gospel does not always magically coincide with American foreign policy, or that Jesus has something to say that is irreconcilable with what Dick Cheney or Richard Perle thinks.”

Perhaps most important of all is the text of a 2003 letter from Bishop John Michael Botean, the Eastern Rite Romanian Catholic eparch of the diocese of St. George in Canton, Ohio. Bishop Botean says outright, in terms binding upon his diocese, “Direct participation in this war is the moral equivalent of direct participation in an abortion. For the Catholics of the Eparchy of St. George, I hereby authoritatively state that such direct participation is intrinsically and gravely evil and therefore absolutely forbidden.” Only the pope can overrule an Eastern Rite bishop’s instructions to his flock on faith and morals—or if pope were persuaded that Bishop Botean had reasoned correctly in his prohibition, he could issue the same command to all Roman Catholics.

Benedict XVI is unlikely to take either action. What Bishop Botean’s letter accomplishes, however—beyond its effect upon his own diocese—is to reveal for Catholics just how high the spiritual stakes of the Iraq War are. The rest of *Neo-conned* achieves something similar, conveying not only to Catholics but to other readers as well the gulf between the claims of conscience and justifications that have been offered for the Iraq War. The book proves that one cannot defer moral reasoning to the state, not even—or least of all—in times of war. ■

[*Rednecks and Blunecks: The Politics of Country Music*, Chris Willman, New Press, 256 pages]

Dueling Banjos

By Marcus Epstein

IN 1974, Richard Nixon told the audience at the Grand Ole Opry,

The peace of the world for generations, maybe centuries to come, will depend not just on America’s military might ... or our wealth ... but it is going to depend on our character, our belief in ourselves, our love of our country, our willingness to not only wear the flag but to stand up for the flag. And country music does that.

At a time when rock music was dominated by the counterculture, Nixon viewed country as the voice of his silent majority. He invited singers such as Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard who penned patriotic pieces to play at the White House.

Today, Nashville pumps out pro-war tunes, and virtually the only celebrities George W. Bush could get for his inauguration were country singers. On the surface, country music appears to be filled with “Conservative Christian, right-wing, Republican, straight, white, American males—soul savin’, flag wavin’, Rush lovin’, land pavin’ personal friends to the Quayles,” as alt-country singer Todd Snider describes his antagonists.

Chris Willman, a contributor to *Entertainment Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Times*, tries to give a more complex landscape of the ideological divisions in country in his book *Rednecks and Blunecks*.

Willman is not much of an authority on politics or country music, but this is not necessarily a shortcoming. He makes no pretenses of expertise and paints a portrait of the differing views of various politicians, musicians, executives, and fans in breezy and conversa-

tional prose rather than making the book a platform for his own opinions on music and politics. The book includes interviews with Jimmy Carter about country music and also with about every single living country star who has something to say about politics.

As one would expect, a great deal of attention is given to the controversies over the war on terror and invasion of Iraq. Alan Jackson’s tribute “Where Were You” won the hearts of Americans with differing musical and political views after 9/11. Rather than get on a soapbox, he candidly admitted, “I’m not sure I can tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran.”

Toby Keith was less humble in “The Angry American,” which celebrated American-led carnage with the memorable line, “we’ll put a boot up your ass, it’s the American way.” Heavy on emotion but light on prosody is Darryl Worley’s “Have you Forgotten,” in which the eponymous question is preceded with the dissonantly rhyming, “and you say we shouldn’t worry ‘bout bin Laden.” Both singers insist that their numbers were about Afghanistan, not Iraq, but they supported the Iraq invasion, and the songs certainly were interpreted by their fans as endorsements. Other pro-war or patriotic hits include Trace Atkins’s “Arlington,” Keith’s “American Soldier,” and Clint Black’s “Iraq and Roll”

While attacking George W. Bush is fashionable in most areas of pop culture, it is not a savvy career move for mainstream country musicians. Shortly before the invasion of Iraq, the Dixie Chicks’ Natalie Maines told a London crowd, “We’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Her criticism knocked the band from the top of the charts to the dumpster. Most country stations stopped playing their music for at least the initial months of the war. One even employed a John Deere to crush listener-donated CDs. The less original simply had their fans throw Dixie Chick albums in the trash or stomp on them. Toby Keith—who was already irked by Maines’s criticism of