

“Everyone would agree Iraq was a mistake”

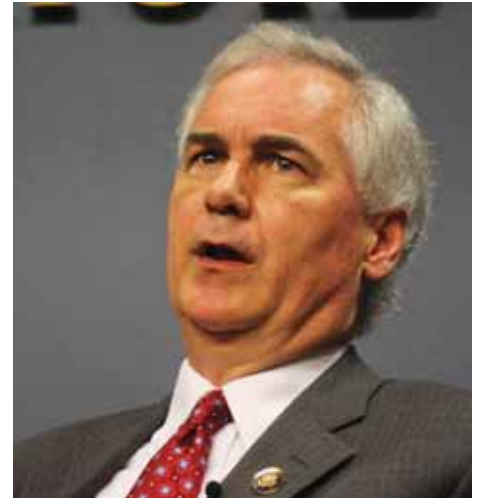
Conservatives Rethink Middle East Adventurism

It was a half day intended to provoke discussion among conservatives regarding the continuing war in Afghanistan. In December, President Obama more than doubled the number of troops in the country. By doing so, he signaled strongly that the war is no longer about hunting down al Qaeda but has instead become a nation-building adventure—a goal typically eschewed by conservatives but eagerly embraced by George W. Bush.

The conference, “Escalate or Withdraw? Conservatives and the War in Afghanistan,” was held at the Cato Institute in March. Through two panel discussions and a keynote speech by former representative Joe Scarborough (R-FL), host of MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*, a series of important questions was addressed. Will conservatives return to their traditional roots and ultimately oppose the war in Afghanistan? Can “nation building” succeed in the midst of that country’s bloody insurgency? What constitutes “success,” and what price should we be willing to pay for it?

But perhaps the most surprising and intriguing moment of the day was about America’s other war. The opening panel, moderated by Americans for Tax Reform’s Grover Norquist, featured Reps. Tom McClintock (R-CA), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and John J. Duncan Jr. (R-TN). Norquist asked the panelists to estimate the portion of Republicans in Congress who would now view the Iraq invasion as a mistake. Rohrabacher responded, “Everybody I know [now] thinks it was a mistake to go in.” McClintock agreed. “I think everyone would agree Iraq was a mistake,” he said. He added, “And, you know, again, I think virtually everyone would agree going into Afghanistan the way we did was a mistake.”

The second panel was a freewheeling conversation featuring Tony Blankley of the *Washington Times*; Donald Devine, editor of *Conservative Battleline Online*; Diana West of the *Washington Examiner*; and Mackenzie Eaglen from the Heritage Foundation. Asked to define what success would look like in Afghanistan, West objected to the term itself, saying that success implies there’s something to win. The more important question, then,



Clockwise: DON DEVINE makes a point to MACKENZIE EAGLEN. ED CRANE talks with JOE SCARBOROUGH before the conference opens. REP. TOM MCCLINTOCK and REP. DANA ROHRABACHER tell the large crowd that their colleagues now agree that the war in Iraq was a mistake.

is what would failure look like? Here, the panel was almost uniformly glum. We’re on the brink of failure, Blankley said, and we will, ultimately, fail. He expressed concern that conservatives, who are typically opposed to social engineering at home, have become so willing to attempt it—on an extraordinarily large scale—abroad.

Wrapping up the conference was Joe Scarborough, who lamented the fact that, in 2010, it’s nearly impossible to tell the difference between Republicans and Democrats when it comes to foreign policy. He said that if conservatives are to regain their way, they need to become less radical, to show restraint at home, abroad, and in their rhetoric. Republicans in the 1990s understood that America

is not the world’s 911 service, Scarborough said, but this crucial conservative insight was lost in the Bush years. “Dogma and rigid ideologies are the enemies of conservative foreign policy,” he said.

By the time the conference ended, and the speakers and attendees went upstairs to the Wintergarden for lunch, it was clear that, while there might not be consensus within the conservative movement for returning to a more prudent foreign policy, there at least exists a large contingent of conservatives ready to abandon nation building and social engineering and return America’s armed forces to agents of national defense.

Video of the event is online at www.cato.org.