

*Nonintervention or overturning despots?*

## Debating Libertarian Foreign Policy

Few issues have split advocates of liberty and limited government like the war in Iraq. Some libertarians and limited-government conservatives—persuaded by the president’s arguments that Iraq was a haven for terrorists and a developer of weapons of mass destruction—supported the invasion. Many others, however, mindful that there was little evidence that Saddam Hussein posed a threat to U.S. security, insisted that the invasion of Iraq fell outside the military’s proper job of defending the homeland from attack. On October 22 libertarians of all stripes gathered in the Cato Institute’s F. A. Hayek Auditorium for a conference, “Lessons from the Iraq War: Reconciling Liberty and Security.”

As Cato’s Charles Peña argued, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the speculative nature of Hussein’s alleged links to Al Qaeda have undermined the original case for war while escalating violence has raised its cost. John Mueller of Ohio State University asserted that the situation in Iraq is hopeless and urged policymakers to avoid romanticizing democracy. Christopher Preble emphasized that a commitment to limited government at home requires a commitment to a restrained foreign policy abroad. Otherwise, he warned, attempts to rein in the federal leviathan will be thwarted by the need for ever-higher taxes to support military endeavors around the world.

But the hawks had arguments of their own. Columnist Deroy Murdock detailed Saddam Hussein’s many links with terrorist organizations, including his cash support for Palestinian terrorists in Israel and his granting of safe haven to terrorists with ties to Al Qaeda. *Reason*’s Ron Bailey argued for a return to the Reagan Doctrine, under which the United States supported armed insurgents seeking to overthrow despotic regimes.

Nick Gillespie, editor of *Reason*, urged libertarians to debate divisive issues like the Iraq war openly. Libertarians, he argued, should cherish debate and dissent rather than demand conformity to dogma.

In his closing remarks, David Kelley of the Objectivist Center argued, “Our enemy is the phenomenon and network of Islamic terrorism,” not just Al Qaeda.



John Mueller of Ohio State University denounces the Iraq war as a major strategic blunder.

We can’t limit our efforts to pursuing Al Qaeda, he said, insisting that foreign policy can’t be bound by the same clear rules that libertarians apply to domestic issues.

Ted Galen Carpenter, Cato’s vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, ended the conference with a stirring defense of a foreign policy of nonintervention. He denounced “crusading interventionism,” which commits the American taxpayer to financing a far-flung global empire, violating the government’s constitutional duty to spend tax dollars in defense of American lives and liberties. ■



At Cato’s conference “Lessons from the Iraq War,” luncheon speaker Nick Gillespie, editor of *Reason* (left), called for open debate among libertarians on foreign policy, and columnist Deroy Murdock vigorously argued that the Iraq war was justified.

David Kelley of the Objectivist Center argues that Islamic terrorism is a threat that the United States must confront.

