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A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for the War in Iraq, edited by Thomas Cushman

Lisa A. Leitz

Chapman University, leitz@chapman.edu

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Comments

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A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq edited by
Thomas Cushman. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Lisa Leitz
University of California, Santa Barbara

The Iraq War has generated intense debate, often reflecting a deep divide between liberals and conservatives. Cushman's edited volume goes beyond political rhetoric to explore the complexity and diversity of opinions on the war within the left. Left-leaning academics, politicians, public intellectuals, and journalists argue from a humanist perspective that the Iraq War was necessary and could have a positive outcome. Dispelling the myth that the only liberal position on the war in Iraq is opposition, this volume provides a compelling case for military responses to human rights abuses and terrorism.

The first two sections of the book outline the humanitarian argument for war. The authors suggest that the Iraq War is justified on the basis of protecting the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's oppressive government and shielding the world from dangerous weapons in the hands of a tyrannous regime. Using the works of Kant and Rawls to argue for a "just war," these authors argue that Iraq required intervention. These chapters are the book's strongest academic contributions. Although many of these authors admit the war has not gone as hoped, their significance lies in the application of these theories to current international crises.

The following three sections critique the anti-war left in the United States and Europe for ignoring the plight of the Iraqi people under Hussein. These authors suggest that liberals have lost sight of a commitment to fighting oppression, particularly in the Middle East. Countering anti-war liberals' claims that they were on the side of the Iraqi people, the authors describe Iraqi support for the initial invasion and toppling of Hussein. Several of the authors, including a Nobel Peace Prize winner, report tyrannous regimes in their own countries as their impetus for supporting regime change in Iraq.


The book concludes with a section on "Liberal Statesmanship" that includes two speeches by Prime Minister Blair that eloquently argue for a humanitarian war in Iraq. By including them in this volume, Cushman furthers the case that the Left should not focus exclusively on the failings of President Bush's administration when considering Iraq.

While many may find it strange that there could be a *humanitarian argument for war*, this book makes a coherent case in favor of using military force to save lives and extend freedoms. The volume also offers an important liberal critique of the United Nations and other international bodies' ability to effectively respond to human rights abuses. However, Cushman falls short of presenting a strong research-based argument for this particular war. None of the chapters present new research, and many use flawed research to support their arguments. Additionally, while many authors undoubtedly felt ostracized by the Left, their anger and defensiveness often overcomes their arguments.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that it does not make excuses for U.S. failures in Iraq. However, this is also one of the book's greatest faults because most authors fail to adequately address how the flawed implementation of a "humanitarian" war undermines their argument. Although the authors suggest that an imperfect government, such as the United States, could enact a positive war, the violent two years since the writing and publication of these chapters begs the question of whether these same authors would argue similarly today.

Cushman contributes to the debate around the Iraq War. The book may be useful for classes on Iraq and international policy, and it could be paired with Diamond's *Squandered Victory*, which provides a well researched description of more contemporary events in Iraq. Similarly, this volume would be interesting

paired with Rosen's edited volume *The Right War?*, which explores the variety of conservative opinions on international policy. As both the complexities of the Iraq War and the continued violence in Darfur demonstrate, academics and citizens can benefit from a more nuanced debate about international responses to human rights violations; Cushman's volume contributes to this nuance.

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