



2014-070

Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 424. ISBN 978-1-62534-018-4.

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With *The Pro-War Movement*, Sandra Scanlon (Univ. College Dublin) has filled a gaping hole in the historiography of the Vietnam War. And she does so with a scholarly detachment that will appeal to all serious students of the war.

The book opens with Ronald Reagan's depiction of the Vietnam War as a noble cause. While his theme of national unity resonated, it was far from clear during the war that it was unifying even for the political right, as the pro-war movement bridged a diversity of conservative opinions. Scanlon pays special attention to the American Conservative Union, Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), and the coterie of intellectuals associated with William F. Buckley's *National Review*. The writers for *Human Events* and several other organizations also receive scrutiny.

Initially, the military situation in Vietnam was of less interest to conservatives than seemingly more pressing developments in Cuba. Seen as President Lyndon Johnson's war, the conflict in southeast Asia offered conservatives the chance to condemn the "defeatism" of containment strategies and to promote small-scale wars designed to "roll back" communist gains. Mutual coexistence was an unacceptable policy. Barry Goldwater,¹ for example, advocated crushing an increasingly aggressive international communist movement, a position taken up by the *National Review* as well. Johnson, ironically, worried that Republicans would pressure him and "wreck all our other programs" (49). Yet conservatives who did push LBJ on his purpose in Vietnam missed the point that he intentionally avoided debating strategy in order to foster the illusion of bipartisan consensus.

Scanlon identifies two principal conservative positions² on the war: one purely anticommunist, uninterested in promoting democracy in South Vietnam; the other holding that "proper targeting" could end the war in two weeks. In typically controlled language, Scanlon explains that "Neither position required an immense conceptual leap for conservatives committed to the efficacy of strategic bombing and convinced of the monolithic communist role in Vietnam. Neither were they immune to the political opportunities afforded by the promotion of a policy that promised to bring to a decisive end a stalemated, increasingly unpopular war" (52). Earlier Cold War conflicts shaped conservatives' understanding of the situation in Vietnam. Goldwater, for example, invoked the legacy of both Korea and Cuba after North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive.

After his election in 1968, President Richard Nixon changed his party's outlook by touting "peace with honor," as his grassroots supporters ran up a banner of patriotism to counter the anti-war movement. The *National Review* abstained from any popular campaign to win over the public, but backed Nixon and his policies even when its editors doubted the wisdom of his decisions. Nixon had no secret plan, but also made no effort to quash rumors of one, because the notion pandered to the Republican party's base. Moreover, his proven anticommunist credentials and his push for a bombing campaign in North Vietnam in 1965 ensured his standing with conservatives, though many questioned his ability to follow through. His new peace-with-honor message achieved broad appeal. In the end, the anti-war movement's opposition to Vietnamization and its calls for immediate withdrawal validated Nixon's strategy in the eyes of members of the American right, even when they disagreed with his perceived soft pedaling. Despite the pro-war faction's

1. Notably in his book *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Pub, 1960), ghostwritten by Brent Bozell, William Buckley's brother-in-law.

2. Citing as representatives *National Review* publisher William Rusher and Goldwater, respectively.

access to the president, Nixon refused to “back and utilize existing pro-war campaigns” (210). Instead, the White House created its own organizations, effectively splitting the movement. The groups the president left to their own devices eventually turned on him to varying degrees.

Scanlon sketches the contours of the various conservative positions, uncovering several interesting details. For example, she sees the fusion of conservatism with libertarianism in the 1960s as resulting precisely from a shared fear of communist expansion. By the 1970s, however, the alliance was badly fraying. As the war raged on, the need to link the anti-war movement directly to the Communist Party had become all the more imperative as Congressional dissent took its toll on Nixon and the business of Congress. And, too, Scanlon shows, the pro-war movement’s spurious equation of dissent with anti-Americanism made it nearly impossible for it to publicly criticize Nixon’s approach to the war, which they saw as a policy of retreat. When activists did publicly disagree with the president, they, like the libertarians, found themselves ostracized.

Scanlon believes the pro-war movement peaked in May 1967, with the “We Support Our Boys in Vietnam” parade in New York City, the largest pro-war event of the conflict. That is, the movement was in decline by the time Nixon took office and never recovered despite later parades and demonstrations throughout the war. Scanlon argues that the pro-war faction simply lacked the numbers to be a formidable opponent of the anti-war movement. This despite the allegiance of organized labor (a photograph of the New York City Hard Hat Riot in 1970 even adorns the book’s cover), a group normally disliked by conservatives.

Cold War rhetoric had lost its appeal by the 1970s, Scanlon observes, and proponents of the war realized that anti-war arguments had been winning over the public even as it grew disenchanted with the New Left. Nixon adviser and speechwriter Patrick Buchanan counseled the president to appeal to those who were “beginning to feel themselves the moral inferiors of the candle-carrying peaceniks who want to get out now” (211). Indeed, alienating the public from the New Left was the special task assigned to Vice President Spiro Agnew, whose speeches for the Middle American Group were usually penned by Buchanan or William Safire. Supportive propaganda became the bailiwick of Nixon special counsel Charles Colson, who, among other tasks, set up the Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace for the purpose of attacking John Kerry and the Vietnam Veterans against the War. Scanlon finds that focusing on the war crimes issue following My Lai and Kerry’s testimony actually backfired and only convinced more of the public of the moral authority of the anti-war position. In the end, “It was the continued frustration with the anti-war movement that propelled conservatives to unify behind an alternative understanding of the war’s legacy for Americans” (14).

Chapter 6 portrays the conservative student movement as far more effective in its organization than any other segment of the American right. The anti-anti-war YAF, which grew out of Goldwater’s presidential campaign, even violently took over offices of the New Left on several campuses. It eventually launched six projects that moved beyond Vietnam toward long-term strategies for gaining political power. The group succumbed to internecine fighting over the fact that only one of its leaders had actually served in Vietnam. Scanlon also highlights the Victory in Vietnam Association and the Campus Republicans. In all cases, she finds that students were “more effective in uniting in opposition to the anti-war movement than any other sector of the pro-war movement” (286). Scanlon’s treatment of the POW/MIA campaign reveals that its originally non-partisan nature originated in family members’ concern for their service members. The campaign, once coopted by the “patriotic” groups, became the final unifying cause of the pro-war movement.

As the book’s subtitle indicates, Scanlon also traces the growth of the conservative movement generally during the 1970s, tapping the recent, burgeoning scholarship on the subject. The pro-war movement crested before Nixon’s election, but its conservative elements gained strength after it, as evidenced in the YAF’s shift from stirring grassroots support for the war to a preoccupation with formulating a long-term strategy to secure political power. The divisions the war opened among conservatives could only be mended after its conclusion: one of the movement’s most visible champions—Ronald Reagan—emerged to lead the renewed alliance. The *National Review* circle, while wielding a different kind of influence on Cold War policy, lost ground to Reagan’s New Right. “The un-won war became a far more powerful motif in promoting the right-

eousness of pro-war arguments than even the supposed peace with honor and stalemate in 1973 had been” (331); blaming liberals for the lost war became a rallying point in the same way that organizing against the anti-war movement had mobilized conservative students on campus. “While the broader public might draw different conclusions about the utility of future military engagements, the conservative memory of Vietnam was firmly incorporated into the public consciousness and facilitated broader interpretations of American victimhood and noble sacrifice, interpretations that gained much resonance in certain elements of popular culture during the 1980s” (342).

The Pro-War Movement deserves a prominent place on graduate seminar reading lists³ and on the bookshelves of all who desire an analytically rich and thoroughgoing treatment of the political transformations wrought by the war in Vietnam.

3. It is not a suitable book for undergraduates, since it assumes a readership sufficiently familiar with previous literature on the war to grasp the significance of the evidence Scanlon presents.