



Report and Retort: Defending The Big Picture

by John C. Hulsman

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In terms of defending my work, I have always clung to the sage advice of the British film star Cary Grant. Supposedly, when confronted by an unflattering article in a magazine, his friends urged him to reply. Grant responded coolly, "Never complain, and never explain."

I always thought that this made a great deal of sense. If you were treated unfairly in a critique, people (at least many of them) would know better. Any poor attempt to state the obvious would merely look defensive. On the other hand, if further explanation was required, perhaps the piece was not clear in the first place. No, best to let the work stand on its own.

But my friend Anatol Lieven, in these pages, has convinced me that the times are too dangerous to continue to follow the elegant star's advice. As he pointed out in his stirring [critique of the promotion of the often-wrong Eliot Cohen](#), neoconservatives at present are not being held to account for the foreign policy disaster of a generation in Iraq. If we continue to live in a society where those who are basically right about history fail to prosper, and those who are wrong face no penalty, we are not likely to remain a great power for long.

Which brings me to [the critique](#) of my piece, "[Designated Driver Diplomacy](#)." Where to start? The author rather gives the game away by being a representative of the Henry Jackson Society, which places him firmly in the neoconservative camp. His most important point, that there are counter-examples to my characterization of the Macmillanite thrust of modern British foreign policy is undoubtedly true but is not remotely the point. While there are trees pointing the other direction, to say there is no forest, that overall British foreign policy has not followed a Macmillanite trajectory, is simply an obfuscation away from my main point—the Bush Administration's ineptitude has led to the uncommented-on demise of an elegant, and largely successful, strategy for dealing with the United States. We now live in a world where both macro European strategies—Macmillanism and Gaullism—have reached their end point.

Further, not to see broad patterns of history correctly is precisely where the neoconservatives have gone so wrong; their consistent failure to perceive genuine macro-historical trends has been their downfall. One recent example should suffice. Seeing the Iraqi nation as the primary political unit of politics in that country ignored the macro-historical reality that the Ottomans had it right—the unit of politics they worked with in the region were vilayets (provinces) dominated by, in turn the Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds. These political groupings correspond to the world as it actually exists. The clarity of this macro-historical point should not be obscured by noticing the obvious—certainly there are citizens of Iraq who see themselves as Iraqis first; however, parliamentary voting patterns have not shown such a group to be in the majority. About this macro-historical point, Ahmed Chalabi and his neoconservative buddies have surely been wrong. Counter-examples, the genuine counter-tides to the macro-historical, must not obscure this reality. Far from being simplistic or a thing of the past, macro-historical patterns are absolutely vital to get right. Of course neoconservatives want to obscure this overwhelming fact; wouldn't you after the debacle of Iraq?

But it isn't the historical myopia of the author that bothers me, or compelled me to reply, defying Cary Grant. Rather, it is the historical smoke screen that is used to try to conjure the magic trick of changing

history. Britain was not the only significant power to support the United States in Iraq; I forgot Poland, Spain and Italy? While all are important countries, I think that anyone who thinks they contributed significantly on the ground in Iraq better take a nap—it was always primarily a U.S. and UK show. But, of course, to see things this way would lead us to the charge of quasi-unilateralism so often leveled at neoconservatives—better to rewrite history. Tony Blair was not destroyed by Iraq? "Meanwhile back on the planet earth", is all I can say. Beating the Tories pre-Cameron is not a sign that the Blair's war policies met with anyone's approval; only that the Tories were not remotely ready for primetime. That the prime minister, the most successful politician in Labour's long history, could be forced from office, can only be put down to Iraq. Everyone who reads the British papers know Blair left Downing Street with the deepest reluctance, and only because of his self-immolation on the pyre of the greatest foreign-policy disaster of the age. But neoconservatives don't want us to dwell on this; someday they may want to do something similar again and would like to have the Brits along for the ride. This historical example could prove worrying.

The neoconservatives are in danger of escaping responsibility for their historical disaster. We must give up the old gentlemanly ways of assuming people will see through them, focus on their macro-historical calamities and see that they never, ever get their Robespierist hands on power again.

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