

## Can You Forgive Them?

Ostracizing the people who were right on Iraq.

By Timothy Noah

The most striking thing about this week's statement by Rep. Doug Bereuter, R-Neb., that "it was a mistake" to go to war in Iraq is how little controversy it's stirred. In canvassing Nebraska's other members of Congress, all of them Republicans save Sen. Ben Nelson, the *Lincoln Journal Star* found no objections to Bereuter's conclusion, and much agreement. The paper's own editorial board praised Bereuter for delivering an "honest and unflinching assessment."

Bereuter's conclusion is uncontroversial because it reflects a growing consensus within the respectable mainstream. William F. Buckley has stated, "[I]f I had known back then in February 2003 what we know now I would not have counseled war against Iraq." The *New Republic* has opined, "The central assumption underlying this magazine's strategic rationale for war now appears to have been wrong." Fareed Zakaria, a former Iraq hawk, now says the Bush administration's "strange combination of arrogance and incompetence has . . . destroyed the hopes for a new Iraq," which is a roundabout way of saying he was wrong to trust its use of military power there. Here at *Slate*, I gave last-minute support to the Iraq war because I believed (wrongly) that Colin Powell's famous Feb. 5 speech to the United Nations left no doubt about the presence of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq. (I'd still like to know what that wiretapped phone conversation concerning "forbidden ammo" was all about.) Had I known then what I know now, I, too, would have opposed the war.

Being wrong about the war may have caused me mild embarrassment among some of my friends on the left, but it has most certainly not cost me entrée into the power salons of Washington (to the marginal extent that I was ever welcome there in the first place). It hasn't exacted a price from anyone else, either. Indeed, some former hawks, like David Brooks and Kenneth Pollack, have enhanced their reputations for thoughtfulness by admitting that they botched this one. But the oddest outcome concerns not those who were wrong about Iraq, but those who were right. The political mainstream shuns them.

The Democratic nominee, you'll notice, is not Howard Dean, who opposed the Iraq invasion, but John Kerry, who favored it, and who now at least pretends to believe that his decision to support the invasion was sound. Walter Pincus, the skeptical hero of Howard Kurtz's admirably critical Aug. 12 examination of the *Washington Post's* Iraq blunders, is nonetheless described in that piece with condescension as a "white-haired curmudgeon" and a "crusader" (inside the *Post*, that's not a compliment) whose stories, as written, are unpublishable. It remains risky for most members of Congress to admit to even reading *The Nation*, much less agreeing with it, but many surely wish they'd heeded its editorial opposing the Iraq war resolution. Patrick Buchanan, who editorialized against going to war in the *American Conservative* and elsewhere, remains a fringe figure even among conservatives.

The non-rehabilitation that seems most baffling and unjust is that of Scott Ritter, the former U.N. weapons inspector who argued till he was blue in the face that the United States would find no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Ritter's reputation was dealt a devastating blow by a November 2001 cover story in the *Weekly Standard* about his weird transformation from Iraq hawk to Iraq dove. Ritter's conversion remains a mystery (he's argued that his views never changed, despite a substantial paper trail to the contrary), and the *Weekly Standard's* Stephen F. Hayes offered it as exhibit A in his argument that Ritter could no longer be taken seriously. But the article is a lot less persuasive today on this latter point than it seemed at the time. It began with Ritter saying, "Iraq today

represents a threat to no one,” which, Hayes opined, was an argument only Tariq Aziz would make. Three years later, of course, Ritter’s assessment seems sound (assuming it did not include people then living *inside* Iraq), and Hayes’ characterization seems idiotic. Here’s another passage from the *Weekly Standard* piece that hasn’t aged well:

Virtually every expert on Iraq and arms control disagrees. Ambassador Butler, Ritter’s former boss with the U.N., says that Iraq never disarmed during the 1990s and almost certainly has weapons of mass destruction today. Charles Duelfer, Butler’s number two, believes Iraq currently has biological and chemical weapons, and the means to deliver them. Arms control experts Gary Milhollin and Kelly Motz, with the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, detailed in the July issue of *Commentary* the steady and stealthy weapons trade with Iraq.

Strictly speaking, this was perfectly accurate. The trouble was that Hayes failed to anticipate that “virtually every expert on Iraq and arms control” could be wrong.

I mean in no way to hold Hayes up to ridicule. Remember, I blew this one, too. But if those of us who thought Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons are to escape censure, minimal fairness demands that those who said Iraq did *not* possess these weapons be accorded some belated respect. But with very few exceptions (the *Boston Globe* is one), the press in the United States continues to treat Ritter as either a leper or a clown. To some, the very fact that Ritter was *right* is precisely what causes offense. Columnist Collin Levey in the April 16 *Seattle Times*, complained that Ritter

wants credit and glory as a prophet for saying that Iraq’s WMD programs were a myth or at least severely curtailed. In February, he wrote a self-satisfied told-ya-so piece in the *International Herald Tribune*. “Not everyone was wrong,” he wrote. “I, for one, was not.”

But if Ritter is blowing his own horn, that may be because nobody else is going to blow it for him. I bet he’d have preferred to blow it on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, two places where his byline has lately been scarce.

Part of Ritter’s problem may be that he is dogged by allegations that he made sexual overtures to a 16-year-old and a 14-year-old. Ritter has confirmed that he was arrested and that the case file was sealed, but he has refused to discuss the matter further. Even assuming the allegations are true, though, it’s easy enough to make the necessary mental distinctions. Scott Ritter: Wrong on age of consent. Right on Iraq.

Not long ago, I spoke with a Democratic moderate about the war in Iraq. He said he considered support for the Iraq war to be a necessary prerequisite to assuming any powerful role in the party. It showed that the person in question was willing to project U.S. force abroad. But wait, I asked. Do you still think the Iraq war was a good idea? After some hemming and hawing, he admitted that he’d rather we hadn’t gone in. Then why make support for a mistaken policy a litmus test? Because, he repeated, it shows that the person in question is willing to project U.S. force abroad. I should emphasize that we *weren’t* talking about whether troops should be *withdrawn* from Iraq, which is an entirely separate and vexing question that speaks to our responsibility in a country whose previous government we destroyed. What this man was saying was that it was better to have been wrong about Iraq than to have been right. That’s the prevailing (though not always conscious) consensus in Washington, and it’s completely insane.