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H-Diplo Review Essay on Sandra Scanlon. *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*. Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-62534-017-7 (cloth, \$80.00); 978-1-62534-018-4 (paper, \$28.95).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Offenbach-Scanlon.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Seth Offenbach**, Bronx Community College, City University of New York

Sandra Scanlon's *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* is an excellent addition to the historiography of American politics surrounding the Vietnam War. Until very recently, studies of modern American conservatism tended to ignore or gloss over right-wing foreign policy. This work helps to correct a shockingly large hole in the historiography of the right's foreign policy during the Vietnam War; it also provides valuable context regarding conservative efforts aimed at supporting Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon's war policies.

The main actors in the book are congressional Republicans, members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the American Federation of Labor, the American Conservative Union, the magazines *Human Events*, *National Review*, *Public Interest*, Young Americans for Freedom, the Victory in Vietnam Association, and the American Security Council. This is a large group of conservative and liberal pro-war organizations, right-wing publications, labor unions, politicians, advocacy groups, and protest organizations. The breadth of the research performed by Scanlon deserves accolades as she tells an interesting and important story about how the "[c]onservative movement... succeeded in allying itself with a populist, patriotic interpretation of the war..." (7).

The Pro-War Movement tells the story about why the right's arguments in favor of the Vietnam War evolved and how domestic politics impacted this evolution. Early in the war, conservative groups such as the American Conservative Union focused on "trying to impact government policy and focused less attention on attempting to sway public opinion" (6). As the war dragged on, and as domestic opposition to the war increased, conservative groups began emphasizing the patriotic necessity of supporting the troops and opposing the anti-

war movement. By the end of the war, much of the right's identity was wrapped in its belief that patriotic Americans supported the Vietnam War.

The Pro-War Movement begins with two introductory chapters on the conservative movement's reaction to American policies in Vietnam prior to 1969. In chapter 1 she discusses how conservatives cared more about other Cold-War locations such as China and Cuba prior to 1964. Chapter 2 analyzes the conservative transition from a movement that was partially ambivalent about "Johnson's war" to one that focused on demonstrating public support for the troops (36). These chapters are historically important and interesting, but they are not the crux of her argument. The book's intellectual focus, which covers five out of seven chapters, is devoted to the complicated relationship between President Richard Nixon, the right, the pro-war movement, and the Vietnam War.

Scanlon's work shines brightest while describing the complicated dance between conservatives and Nixon. On the one hand, groups such as *National Review* were happy to have a Republican in the White House, and one who publicly proclaimed his support for both the troops and the military. On the other hand, conservative groups were extremely wary of Nixon's Vietnam and Cold War policies and even withdrew support for Nixon for a brief period in 1971-72 because of his détente policies. The right needed Nixon, but it disapproved of much of what he did in office.

Scanlon also brings to light the methods used by Nixon to co-opt the pro-war movement. Depicting Nixon as a smart and cunning political strategist, Scanlon describes how the President tried to create a movement which was pro-war, pro-troops, pro-POWs and which would support his Vietnam policies. Nixon worked hard to make it appear as though this was a genuine grassroots movement, and he was able to use conservative groups such as Young Americans for Freedom and the American Legion to his benefit. One criticism of Scanlon's methodology—which is most evident in chapter 5—is that much of her analysis of the pro-war groups is filtered through the lens of the groups' relationship to Nixon. This gives the unstated impression that there was little genuine grassroots support for the war, which is a questionable implication. In this context, a little less Nixon would have gone a long way.

Scanlon's analysis of the conservative youth group Young Americans for Freedom in chapter 6 is impressive. This group was one of the most vocal pro-war organizations and helped to support various pro-troops, pro-war, and pro-POWs rallies throughout the nation. Additionally, it organized periodic counter-protests against anti-war rallies. At its peak this organization had over 500 chapters and almost 20,000 members, although it declined rapidly in the early 1970s, just as the New Right movement was starting to take off. By the end of the 1970s it was barely relevant in national politics. Scanlon wisely attributes some of the decline to the organization's support for Nixon's Vietnamization program in the early 1970s. Though the group's leadership had many philosophical differences with Nixon, Scanlon describes a group of young individuals who struggled to keep the organization's ideas up with the times. The leaders were not able to successfully transition the movement from one that opposed the anti-war movement to one that

supported the war and the president. As the war concluded, and the anti-war protests ended, the Young Americans for Freedom began to collapse.

On its surface, *The Pro-War Movement* aims at examining all of the groups that supported the Vietnam War. To accomplish this goal, Scanlon needed to bring together several constituencies which did not like working together, such as *National Review* and the American Federation of Labor. On the positive note, this makes her work accessible to labor historians and other historians who study the domestic impact of the Vietnam War but who are unlikely to pick up a book about modern conservatism. Unfortunately, it could also make for an awkward understanding of the period when read by those with little historiographical knowledge. It is commendable to want to bring together these disparate groups and to build intellectual bridges between different historiographies, but this approach comes with drawbacks. A notable problem with this methodological approach is that Scanlon does not spend as much time interpreting how the shifts within the conservative movement were caused by the Vietnam War. In essence, this work does an excellent job of describing what the right and pro-war left said about the Vietnam War, but the author could have gone further in her analysis of how that support for the war impacted politics.

Scanlon's approach of documenting what these various pro-war groups said about the Vietnam War opens the door to new research down the road. An interesting question that future scholars can answer is how the connection between the pro-war left and right impacted domestic politics, and possibly played a role in the formation of the neoconservative movement. Another topic which Scanlon introduces but leaves for other historians is the role of pro-war celebrities such as Bob Hope. Scanlon does not attempt to answer either question, and it would be unfair to have expected more detail on either topic, but her work does open up fresh new topics for discussion within the field of conservatism and American foreign policy.

The Pro-War Movement is a strong addition to the historiography about the domestic politics surrounding the Vietnam War. It nicely compliments Andrew Johns's *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* in offering historians a clearer picture of what conservatives and Republicans were saying about the Vietnam War.¹ Overall, it is hard for this reviewer to imagine a graduate-level course about the domestic impact of the Vietnam War not including at least one of these two books, with Scanlon's work focusing on pro-war activists and Johns's focusing on the Republican Party and political operatives. Both books tell an important story of the domestic side of politics during the Vietnam War.

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¹ Andrew Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

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Conservative Dilemma,” is published in *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism’s Decade of Transformation*, edited by Laura Jane Gifford and Daniel K. Williams (Palgrave MacMillian, 2012). He has served as List Editor of the H-Diplo listserv since 2009 and Book Review Editor since 2012.

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