

Why We're Losing the War on Terror

by Paul Rogers, Polity, 2008, 180 pp.

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When the concept for this book was pitched to the editor, *Why We're Losing the War on Terror*, probably seemed like quite a safe bet for Paul Rogers. 2006 had been a disastrous year in Iraq, with violence widespread and the insurgency seemingly transcendent, and the majority of this book was probably written when the US 'surge' was but a twinkle in George Bush's eye. What wretched timing for Rogers then, that his book should be released at a time when American success in prosecuting the War on Terror is possibly at its highest point since the halcyon days of early 2003. Iraq is the best example of this. All forms of violence are massively down, figures for the dead and wounded have fallen, [1] the number of troops joining the Iraqi security force is on the up, [2] the flow of refugees leaving has been reversed, and al-Qaeda is in disarray. [3] It is therefore not the greatest context for Rogers – a professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University – to release a book fiercely lampooning the American effort there.

Rogers' work analyses the War on Terror thus far, the policies implemented by the U.S. and its allies, and sets out why he perceives them to have 'failed'. His overarching viewpoint is perhaps most succinctly elucidated on the back-page blurb: 'The war on terror is a lost cause. As the war heads towards its second decade, American security policy is in disarray – the Iraq War is a disaster, Afghanistan is deeply insecure and the al-Qaeda movement remains as potent as ever.'

Split into three sections, Rogers first attempts to place the War on Terror in context by looking at George Bush's foreign policy and the influence of neoconservatives in the lead up to 9/11, as well as military advances made during the 1990s and the issue of oil security in the Persian Gulf. It is Rogers's assertion that '[f]rom a US perspective...its long-term relationship with China, its more general influence on the world economy and its own energy security all relate strongly to retaining security dominance in the Persian Gulf.'

Part II examines the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the attempts made to counter al-Qaeda. As befits a book of this title, needless to say Rogers does not believe these

to have been successful. The Iraq operation is labelled 'delusional' and Operation Enduring Freedom was 'flawed from the outset.' Al-Qaeda, Rogers laments, 'could have hardly have asked for anything more likely to aid their cause.'

The final part of Rogers's book is concerned with the consequences of U.S. policy so far – all disastrous, of course – and seeks to offer an alternative to the 'control paradigm' that is at the centre of the War on Terror. Rogers proposes a 'sustainable security' paradigm that focuses its energies on socio-economic divisions and environmental problems – 'the major security issues of the next few decades,' apparently.

In terms of pressing the buttons mandatory in any text criticising America in the War on Terror, Rogers hits the ground running. Following a cursory and incomplete discussion of the influence of neoconservatives in the Bush administration – in which the fact that none were in the very top positions, and the fact that one of Bush's most trusted advisers, Condoleezza Rice, was a hard-headed realist are ignored – we are quickly moved on to the insidious influence of certain lobby groups. According to Rogers, Christian Zionism, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the evangelical Christians managed to gain disproportionate influence over policy by working with the neoconservatives. The prospect of being able to deride Christian fundamentalists, the biggest Jewish lobby and the nefarious neoconservatives at the same time is of course is too wonderful an opportunity for any self-respecting anti-American to miss. Therefore we get an overly simplistic, if all too common, portrayal of Christian Zionists, AIPAC and neoconservatives working together to push policy in an unseemly, hawkish direction. That, for example, 'neoconservatives' and the 'lobby' have different perceptions of international relations does not occur to Rogers. It should. Not only are many neoconservatives not Jewish, but neoconservatives have a much greater faith in the democratic potential of Arabs in the Middle East than many Israelis do; see the scepticism afforded to the neoconservative plans in the Middle East by the Israeli defense establishment as proof of this. [4]

Rogers keeps up the momentum by then moving to another oft-cited favourite of those critical of US policy in Iraq; access to oil supplies as a decisive motivation behind the invasion. Rogers tells us the 'significance of oil security for the United States ... has received surprisingly little coverage in the international relations literature.' Two points are of interest here. Firstly, the idea that there has been insufficient attention being paid as to whether the Iraq invasion was about oil is an

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incredible one. The claim has received endless attention in the mass media especially, with a great deal of it feverishly attempting to portray Iraq as nothing *but* a war for oil. The reason this has perhaps not spilled into the international relations realm is hopefully because most foreign policy thinkers, regardless as to whether they were supporters of the Iraq war or not, realise it is such an absurd proposition. To say that oil is vital to the U.S. is common sense (see their continued amicable relationship with the vile Saudi regime as proof of this); however the notion that we went to war for Iraqi reserves is a non-starter. There were considerable opportunities to cut deals with Saddam Hussein in return for his oil – just ask Jacques Chirac. The US also handed over control of the oil fields to the Iraqis as quickly as possible; too quickly in fact, before they were ready to protect them properly from militia sabotage. Rogers is wrong. The Iraq war is not explicable in terms of oil supply.

I have highlighted these sections of the opening chapter because it sets the basis for much of what follows in the remainder of this book. Quite simply, it is a tour-de-force of misguided leftism. Rogers fails to comprehend the presence of an existential threat, and is utterly misguided in how to respond to the rise of radical Islam. Yet what makes this especially interesting is that Rogers does have some understanding of al-Qaeda; namely that they are focussed primarily on long-term success, believing that they are in a cosmic struggle with the *kuffar*, and that their greater aim is that if an Islamist Caliphate. Unfortunately the lessons Rogers takes from this are not the correct ones.

Put bluntly, Rogers wants appeasement, forwarding the line that has been parroted with such depressing regularity; namely that we must withdraw from Iraq, close Guantanamo Bay immediately, reduce defense spending, and hope that the Islamists will no longer be angry with us. However as Andrew Anthony has correctly pointed out, ‘Once Britain had complied with all Islamist demands, even if it could...Would it all stop there? Would radical Islam return to the more arcane matters like when it was appropriate to stone women to death? Or would there be some other issue somewhere in the world that would trigger a whole new threat?’ [5]

Appeasement is not, and never will be, a viable option. Rogers discusses Cold War history in the ‘Political Context’ section, but seems to ignore the lessons learned from it (as well as World War Two): to win ideological battles, you must face your enemy down. Success came from championing our principles (Jackson/Reagan), not altering our behaviour at the behest of the opposition (Nixon/Kissinger’s detente, Carter). Rogers is not alone in this misreading of history. Many in the

West are determined to blank out the sacrifices that were made throughout much of the last century to achieve the brief 'holiday from history' of the 1990s.

To be fair, Rogers has taken on board certain 'lessons' from the Cold War. He describes as 'remarkably prescient' (p. 84) the remarks made by Walden Bello in his criticism of 'what was seen as indiscriminate force' used by the US in Korea and Vietnam. See how the system that the US 'indiscriminately' fought against is currently treating its people in the North of Korea, or the rapidity with which the brutal communist regime of North Vietnam overwhelmed the South, and what it did to the South Vietnamese people thereafter for a refutation of this line of thinking. In his desperation to attack the US, Rogers conveniently overlooks this. It must be said though, that erroneous analogies with Korea and Vietnam are not the only puzzling things said by Rogers in regard to the Cold War. He talks of the 'detente of the early 1960s.' (p. 3) and one hopes for Rogers' sake that this is merely careless writing; otherwise he must genuinely believe that the Berlin airlift, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the first rumblings of the Vietnam war constitute détente.

Eventually, of course, *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* makes the inevitable link back to the Israel-Palestine issue. Rogers feels a lack of condemnation from Washington for Israeli actions fuels support for radical Islam, the US-Israel connection giving 'huge value...to the al-Qaeda movement and its associates' (p. 106). This is a common, but hugely misconceived notion. Followed to its logical conclusion, the Rogers viewpoint portrays a section of the Middle East population patiently waiting for a US condemnation of Israel that will serve to quell their anger. However, as Michael Gove has said, 'When Osama bin Laden talks of the Zionist-Crusader alliance, he is not referring, in his quaint way, to a current diplomatic accommodation between Israel and the West ... He and his fellow Islamists see today's Zionists, like the medieval Crusaders, as simply another manifestation of Islam's eternal enemy: the intransigent infidel.' [6]

Bluntly, Rogers would have us abandon support for a besieged ally because those that would fly jets into our buildings or explode themselves on our transport system say we should. Reading the Hamas charter [7] should be enough for friends of democracy in the West to know that abandonment of Israel in this inflammatory subject is absolute folly.

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Osama bin Laden has shown little interest in the plight of the Palestinians [8] and why so many assume it is a seminal issue for al-Qaeda is baffling. Bin Laden was planning 9/11 while the Israel-Palestine peace process was at its apex, and while Bill Clinton was in the White House. This is another fact that is mistakenly, or deliberately, over-looked by so many in the desire to attack the US. In the Rogers scenario, settling Palestinian grievances will end radical Islam's resentment of the West (p. 144). After this, presumably, they will be amenable to Starbucks and the non-stoning of women. It is unlikely to say the least. As Nick Cohen has written:

Perhaps it will satisfy all the Islamists who are currently saying that their wars in Chechnya, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kashmir and Somalia, and their terrorist campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, India, Britain, France, Spain, the United States, Denmark, Holland, Canada and Australia are part of a united war against paganism and for a Caliphate. Maybe they will shake themselves and say 'fair enough, we realize that now you've addressed our root cause, we don't want a theocratic empire after all and will return to a civilian life. [9]

However it is not just in the realm of ideas that Rogers's book ultimately fails to convince. Events on the ground in Iraq, especially, prove that the War on Terror is far from 'lost.' The Iraq war has been of 'great value to the movement,' according to Rogers. Therefore one can only wonder what he makes of the recent al-Qaeda acknowledgement that it is in a state of 'extraordinary crisis' in Iraq, with surge-inspired American victories creating 'weakness and psychological defeat.' [10] Rogers also refers to 'evidence that more Iraqis were supporting the broad aims of the al-Qaeda movement.' (p. 113) If this is his barometer for progress in Iraq then his argument subsequently flounders, as more and more of the Iraqi people have inevitably turned against al-Qaeda. Such a reactionary force was never going to be able to sustain popular support in a fledgling democracy once the people of Iraq realised what darkness they were trying to bring to their nation.

Rogers has stretched incredulity almost to breaking point before he reaches the final section of his book. There is 'little alternative' but withdrawal from Iraq, he says – despite the bloodshed it would bring, and despite the wishes of the Iraqi government. He presupposes that the West is responsible for the development of every disaffected organisation that seeks to gain political advancement by cold-blooded killing, and is guilty of seeking to maintain a 'control paradigm' whilst not exploring the 'motives and mindsets' of radical Islam.

However Rogers goes beyond merely the perverserelativism of so much contemporary thought. Intriguingly, he believes we should recalibrate our attention away from a threat that is genuine – unless it has been only in our collective imaginations that attacks against the West have been taking place with alarming regularity for at least two decades – and focus on one that is hypothetical. I am referring of course to the ‘Get Out Of Jail Free’ card so beloved of those that are desperate to avoid facing down radical Islam, that of climate change. How reducing our carbon emissions will stop fanatical suicide bombers is left to the readers’ imagination. Rogers also makes reference to the growing ‘socio-economic divide’ as the other ‘great challenge’ we face in the 21st century. Again, how Africa becoming a less impoverished continent – as desirable as this is – may stop those trained in terrorist camps in Afghanistan flying planes into buildings is never quite elucidated.

Rogers’ work will be given short thrift by any serious foreign policy thinker. But it is worrying that this nonsense is being taught at ‘peace studies’ programmes at universities throughout the U.S. and Europe. Bruce Bawer has written quite superbly [11] on the ‘Peace Racket’ movement to which Rogers belongs, and little more needs adding other than to say that it is the Allan Bloom [12] nightmare come to fruition. When the future leaders being produced in the universities and academies are so beset by relativism – their minds so open they are closed, as Bloom put it – that they can’t discern friend from foe, it is time to get very worried indeed.

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Notes

[1] Muir 2007.

[2] Platts 2008.

[3] Fletcher 2008.

[4] Mead 2007.

[5] Anthony 2007.

[6] Gove 2007.

[7] Hamas 1988.

[8] Murray 2005.

[9] Cohen 2007.

[10] Fletcher 2008.

[11] Bawer 2007.

[12] Bloom 1987.