

Why We're Losing the War on Terror

Paul Rogers

Reviewed by Brian Agnew

Retired US General Barry McCaffrey, returning from a recent visit to Iraq, provided an upbeat assessment of the six-year war there claiming that the United States is now clearly in the end game in that theatre. He judged that there was a dramatic and growing momentum for economic and security stability which is unlikely to be reversible. If this proves to be the case, the US will have rescued the situation from near disaster. The other counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan is yet to reach such a tipping point. With these apparent changes in fortune, the timing and thrust of Paul Rogers's *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* is perhaps unfortunate.

The question in his title encapsulates the core problem with the book, and not just because it implies a subjective pre-conception that the 'war on terror' (whatever that is) is lost. Rogers' approach is to chronicle recent events in lieu of analysis. This also evades the necessity to focus on the identity and nature of the specific threat involved, in this case *Islamist terrorism*. Rogers does not really define what he means by the *war* concerned either. Is it just the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, together or separately, or does it include the broader, inter-linked and largely UN-endorsed military, law enforcement and rule-of-law campaigns against Islamist terrorism across much of the world?

Rogers examines the early years of what he describes as the 'war on terror' to analyse why the US and its partners have failed to achieve their aims. As Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford in the UK, Rogers' work is typical of this multi-disciplinary genre and indeed the book's specialist social sciences publisher. Originally trained as a biologist, Rogers' interests migrated to international relations following the oil shock associated with the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Currently his focus is on the war on terrorism and this is not his first book on the topic. Rogers has received widespread attention through his monthly reports for the Oxford Research Group and previously his weekly commentary on the *Open Democracy* website.

The book is presented in three parts. The first addresses the context of the period leading up to the events of 9/11. He describes what he believes to be the American political developments, especially the rise of the neoconservatives and Christian Zionists in an unlikely fusion, that delivered the 'war on terror'. Military developments involved with the rise of the US as the sole superpower are discussed, as is the USA's long term commitment to the security of Persian Gulf oil supplies.

The second part analyses the Iraqi and Afghan campaigns as attempts to defeat al-Qa'eda as a movement. Several aspects of each action are examined including, for example, the impact of the 2004 Battle for Fallujah and the decision

by India not to deploy a division to Iraq. The third part of the book examines the consequences of US policy and suggests an alternative Western security posture.

With such a broad canvas the book is simply too brief to explore the subject in any definitive or academically objective manner. Roger's style is easy to read, and the book is helpfully footnoted and unmarred by major factual errors. But his selection of argument and presentation of supporting evidence is restricted to those that clearly support his conclusions, or that are likely to capture the interest of a casual reader. There are only limited attempts to present countervailing views.

A chapter proposing to explore 'the relationship of the oil issue to the war on terror', for example, is superficial at best. Rogers summarises the dependency of industrialised and industrialising countries on oil imports (with the US and China importing 63 and 50 per cent of their requirements respectively), but then stating that the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf provide 60 per cent of the world's proven reserves does not in itself link such matters to the 'war on terror'. Nor can the creation of US Central Command be attributed to this alone, rather than the broader intention to help provide greater stability in a strategically volatile region – and where this instability and the international reactions to it long predate the rise of Al Qa'eda in particular and Islamist extremism generally.

The book's final chapter purports to provide an alternative model to what he posits as the current 'western security posture'. Rogers suggests that the 'control paradigm' used by the West to defeat its enemies has failed, as evidenced by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He suggests that 9/11 has put back by five years or more the possibility of embracing a more sustainable approach to security. Environmental impact of human activities on the entire biosphere and the 'brutal divisions of wealth and poverty' are suggested as the 'core drivers of future insecurity'. How this alternative approach might defeat Islamist fascism is not explained.

Rogers has provided an easily readable but one-sided view of events, and the possible causes for current conflicts centred in the Middle East. He promises much but falls well short of delivering a well-reasoned critique of the war on terrorism, its perceived origins and potential resolution. ♦

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