

## The war on error

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By Gideon Rachman

Published: September 28 2007 23:15 | Last updated: September 28 2007 23:15

It is now clear that America's decision to invade Iraq was a grave mistake. The US is searching for a way out of the war and a presidential election is in the offing. Under the circumstances, one might expect a passionate and informed debate to be taking place about America's role in the world.

In fact, the foreign policy argument in the US is rather disappointing. It sometimes looks as if Americans are so shell-shocked by the debacle of Iraq that they are unable to think clearly or boldly. The presidential election campaign seems actually to be inhibiting debate, as candidates cautiously manoeuvre for position – and seek to avoid making politically costly errors.

Three new books attempt, in different ways, to open up the debate by answering the question of what went wrong, and charting a way forward.

The neo-conservatives, who pressed so hard for the war in Iraq, loved to speak of the need for “moral clarity” in the framing of foreign policy. Philip Gordon of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank, offers something that is even more valuable: intellectual clarity.

In *Winning the Right War*, Gordon's focus is the “war on terror”. As he points out: “Bush has given many different explanations of terrorism over the years, but the main ones seem to be a hatred for freedom, the lack of democracy, and America's past unwillingness to respond forcefully enough to terrorist attacks.”

In tight and witty prose, Gordon quietly dismantles each of these arguments. He points out that terrorists do not attack “free” countries indiscriminately. There are plenty of democratic countries that have not been targeted by terrorists, and many undemocratic countries – Saudi Arabia, Egypt – which have suffered badly. Opinion polls also show that many of the same people in Muslim countries who express admiration for Osama bin Laden also want free elections and a free press.

In the same vein, Gordon argues that the promotion of democracy can be “counterproductive and even dangerous” as an anti-terrorism strategy. Hamas, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the Iraqi Islamist parties are not the “freedom loving” groups that the Bush administration had in mind when it suggested that democracy was the silver bullet that could kill off terror. As for the use of force, it too can be counter-productive. The Iraq war has served as a recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda. As Gordon points out: “One of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's favourite sayings was that ‘weakness is provocative’. But it turns out toughness can be provocative as well.”

Many of these points may strike a non-American audience as blindingly obvious. But it still requires political courage to make these arguments in the US at the moment. That is because they point to an uncomfortable conclusion. If the explanations advanced by the Bush administration for terrorism are misleading, then perhaps US foreign policy itself may have helped to foment terrorism? This is still a difficult argument to make because it opens people up to the charge of “sympathising with the terrorists” or “blaming America first”. In this respect, the neo-cons were right. It is easier to sell “moral clarity”. All the same, the Bush administration's foreign policy is now a fairly easy target. The real challenge involves moving beyond a critique of its mistakes and proposing an alternative.

In *Containment*, Ian Shapiro, a professor at Yale, reaches the same conclusion as Gordon, arguing that America's approach to terrorism should henceforth be based on the policy of “containment” of the Soviet Union that ultimately proved so successful in the cold war. A containment strategy would recognise that the US is once again locked into a long-term

ideological struggle. It would emphasise patience, vigilance and the protection of liberal values rather than the desire for a quick military victory. The US will ultimately prevail not because it pummels its enemies into the ground – but because the American social and political system will prove more successful and attractive than the rival ideology.

At the moment, opinion polls suggest the opposite – a disastrous-looking collapse in support for the US around the world. Shapiro suggests that a containment strategy could change this situation: “Containment has moral legitimacy precisely because it eschews domination. The Bush doctrine, by contrast, is a raw assertion of American might.”

But, even after the debacle of Iraq, it is tempting for politicians to demonstrate that they are uncompromising on terror by emphasising a military response. Even the liberal candidates in the presidential election are obliged to talk tough. Barack Obama, a Democratic candidate whom Gordon advises, has recently said that he would authorise American military action against al-Qaeda bases in Pakistan, even without the consent of the Pakistani government. It is pretty clear that this is not a policy that Gordon would agree with.

Other aspects of the Bush administration’s foreign policy are so deeply rooted in America’s view of itself that even liberal critics find it hard to break with the consensus. Both Gordon and Shapiro support the idea that promoting democracy around the world should be a goal of American foreign policy. They disagree with the Bush administration about how this should be done. But the principle remains sacrosanct, even after the discouraging experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Why is it that the American foreign policy debate finds it so hard to break away from the same sterile ideas and slogans about terror, evil and the onward march of freedom? Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke offer an original and convincing explanation in *The Silence of the Rational Center*. They identify two broad trends that are dumbing down the foreign policy debate in the US. The first is an American susceptibility to “Big Ideas” such as the “axis of evil”, the “clash of civilisations” or “the end of history”. This “tends to compress complex issues into simple nostrums and obfuscate rather than illuminate”, they argue. The second element includes the demands of a voracious media “hungry for a constant stream of catchy notions”. Together these tendencies have created a climate in which “superficial explanations are rewarded and expert analysis, which is usually complex, is penalised”.

It would be easy to dismiss this argument as little more than the patrician distaste of foreign-policy experts for the vulgarity of public debate. But Halper and Clarke illustrate their argument convincingly with a wealth of detail that is sometimes amusing – and frequently depressing. They offer an unusually irreverent tour of the Washington think-tank and media scene. Their book also includes revealing transcripts of television interviews in which the likes of Henry Kissinger and Richard Holbrooke attempt to say something sensible and nuanced to hyperactive television hosts such as Bill O’Reilly or Sean Hannity. Both of these eminent former diplomats struggle to get beyond the first sentence, before being cut off or corralled into some grotesque simplification.

Does this kind of thing really matter, when it comes to the making of policy? The history of the Bush administration suggests that it does. One of the great selling points of neo-conservatism was that it provided a simple and morally comforting view of the world. It is no coincidence that many of the most prominent and influential neo-cons were journalists rather than academics or civil servants. They knew how to come up with catchy slogans – and how to promote them.

Even as they describe and bemoan this process, the liberal critics of the Bush administration are sucked into the same game. In different ways, each of these authors is clearly struggling to come up with the single Big Idea that will command public attention.

The restoration of the doctrine of “containment”, the Big Idea promoted both by Gordon and by Shapiro, has many attractions. George Kennan, the intellectual architect of containment, is quoted at length in both books. Kennan is also clearly a hero of Halper and Clarke. They highlight his warning against an American tendency to see foreign policy in “apocalyptic” terms and to believe that: “If we lose, all is lost and life will no longer be worth living; there will be nothing to be salvaged. But if we win, then everything will be possible; all our problems will be soluble; the one great source of evil, our enemy, will have been crushed; the forces of good will then sweep forward unimpeded.”

Kennan was writing in 1961, but his words have an obvious contemporary relevance to the Bush administration's struggle against the "axis of evil". However, for all the strengths of the idea and the efforts of authors such as Gordon, I doubt that a restoration of Kennan-inspired containment will turn out to be the next Big Idea that drives American foreign policy.

Containment is unlikely to win for three reasons. First, containment is an old slogan – and the political and media environment described by Halper and Clarke thrives on the new. Second, it is a complex and nuanced idea, which emphasises patience rather than a quick fix. And finally – and perhaps most importantly – it does not seem entirely appropriate to the new challenges posed by "non-state actors".

There are obvious difficulties about transferring the idea of containment from the cold war to counter-terrorism. The Soviet Union was a state with a clearly defined leadership. If the US wanted to sanction, oppose or just talk to the leadership of the USSR, at least it knew where to find it. Containing a shadowy terrorist organisation is a different kind of job. The terrorists have far fewer resources than the Soviet Union, but they are also harder to find, understand or deter. In an attempt to get around this problem, Shapiro emphasises the importance of state-sponsors of terrorism – who can be deterred. It's a nice try, but not entirely convincing.

The fact that a containment strategy does not provide a complete answer to the foreign policy challenges that the next American president will face is not a condemnation of these books. For the fact is that no single "doctrine" is likely to provide a clear foreign policy map for any new American administration.

This becomes clear when the authors turn to the specific foreign policy challenges that will sit in a new president's in-box – Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process and China. Inevitably, they come up with a range of recommendations that are complex and sometimes appear contradictory. The world is like that. But try telling that to the voters or to the hosts on Fox television. Even after Iraq, it seems unlikely that America will soon be cured of its taste for the next Big Idea.

*Gideon Rachman is the FT's chief foreign affairs columnist*

### **Winning the Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World**

By Philip Gordon

*Times Books \$24, 224 pages*

### **Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror**

By Ian Shapiro

*Princeton University Press £14.95, 208 pages*

**FT bookshop** price: £11.96

### **The Silence of the Rational Center: Why American Foreign Policy is Failing**

By Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke

*Basic £15.99, 329 pages*

FT bookshop price: £12.79

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