

Is America a Rogue State?

The US has rogue leaders, but that does not make it a rogue state; America has plenty to answer for, but the country itself set the standards by which we habitually judge it.
By Jennifer Rankin

In a little-noticed announcement in September, President Bush's government named Syria and Libya as 'rogue states' whose weapons of mass destruction must be controlled at all costs. Although Republicans quickly dubbed them 'the axis of evil plus', these additions to America's list of rogues did not hit the headlines. For as the US singles out North Korea, Syria and Libya, the international community is increasingly looking the other way, back towards the country pointing the finger. People all over the world have come to believe that the biggest threat to world security is wrapped in the Stars and Stripes.

At first glance the US displays all the hallmarks of the classic rogue state. Its foreign policy is aggressive; it ignores international law; it is relentless in its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Factor in that the president came to power on a minority of votes and it seems an open-and-shut case.

Indeed, for many critics of US foreign policy, this idea has attained the status of a self-evident truth. Noam Chomsky has led the way in exposing the immoral underside of America's (so-called) benign hegemony. Writing from the heart of the American academic establishment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Chomsky has identified the US as the worst rogue in a global rogues' gallery. Gore Vidal has said that the Bush regime is just one of 'many bad regimes on earth'. Even conservative commentators are conscious of world opinion. Samuel Huntington, better known for his controversial thesis on 'the clash of civilisations' between the west and Islam, noted in 1999 that 'while the US regularly denounces various countries as 'rogue states', in the eyes of many countries, it is becoming the rogue superpower'. In Europe, an array of critics from politicians to street protesters uses the label. In 2001, Harold Pinter denounced the US as the 'most dangerous power the world has ever known - the authentic rogue state, but a rogue state of colossal military and economic might'.

The evidence is not hard to find. In order to 'save the world' from 'the communist conspiracy', US agencies such as the CIA quashed democratically elected governments and courted murderers, including General Pinochet in Chile, General Suharto in Indonesia and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. William Blum, a former State Department official and the author of *Rogue State: a guide to the world's only superpower*, estimates that the US has tried to overthrow at least 40 foreign governments since 1945. The US also leads the way in that other aspect of rogue state behaviour, weapons of mass destruction. With 30,000 tonnes of chemical weapons,



the world's largest stores of smallpox and anthrax, and the biggest nuclear arsenal on the planet, the US military establishment must be the envy of all dictators. Finally, the US has made itself literally an outlaw state by acting above and beyond global conventions - the Kyoto treaty, the International Criminal Court and the anti-ballistic missiles treaty, to mention just three. This makes it meet the definition of the classic rogue state, in that it exhibits 'a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world'.

That phrase was the work of Anthony Lake, a national security adviser to Bill Clinton, who coined it in 1994 as part of the Clinton administration's definition of 'backlash states'. In fact, the whole concept of the rogue state was invented in the United States. Designed to isolate and demonise countries that would not go the American way, this name-calling approach emerged to fill the foreign-policy gap that appeared after the demise of the 'evil empire'. And like those other catchy slogans 'war on terror' and 'axis of evil', it proved too simplistic to be useful. One State Department official, John Limbert, commented in 1999: 'The use of the term rogue state may make for a good soundbite, but it doesn't make for good policy.'

There is something puzzling about America's critics taking their conceptual cue from a failed US foreign policy. Again, there is more than semantics at stake. Applied to the US, the rogue-state label is in part linguistic backlash, but it is also shorthand for a world-view. In accusing the US of being a rogue state, critics have gone through the looking-glass into a world where everything is in reverse. Like the view in the mirror of the US administration, it is a distorted, American-centric world that does not really exist. The US is not responsible for all the world's troubles or successes. Moreover, the 'backlash state' doctrine outlined by Lake and pursued conscientiously by the Bush administration has failed to produce a useful framework for conducting foreign relations. It is worth outlining some of these failures, because they illustrate the pitfalls of substituting slogans for policies.

Naming and shaming countries such as Iraq, Iran, Libya and Cuba did not alter their behaviour, except perhaps to make them more hostile to the US. In similar fashion, designating the United States as a rogue state could, by adding weight to the arguments of unilateralists (Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld) for further withdrawal from world institutions, prove unpleasantly self-fulfilling. Providing American hardliners with a licence to retreat from global responsibilities in this way would be a grave mistake, especially as these hardliners are running into the limits of US power in Iraq. The language of the rogue state, in other words, inhibits constructive dialogue. This is what the Clinton administration found in North Korea in the 1990s and why it abandoned the doctrine in favour of the much more flexible approach of critical engagement.



For critics of the US rogue doctrine, one of the biggest problems was its inconsistency. The shaky way it divided the world into rogue and 'right' states opened the US to charges of hypocrisy. Officially, for example, Iraq was a rogue state for its invasion of Kuwait but Indonesia, despite its invasion of East Timor, was not. The approach also discouraged the US from making a critical evaluation of its own policy shortcomings, such as its past record of assisting some of those same foreign leaders who subsequently took their countries into the pantheon of rogue states. But these arguments divert attention from the much more pressing question of how to deal with genuinely oppressive regimes. Criticising the US for being a rogue state, for example, did nothing to help the Iraqi people in their struggle against Saddam Hussein. As Gore Vidal's remark suggests, critics believe there is a moral equivalence between the US and oppressive regimes like Saddam's. However, these critics probably also know which of these 'rogue states' they would rather live in.

The rogue-state tag not only fails as a policy tool but, equally important, it fails as an accurate description. It just doesn't fit the diversity of the United States. It is true that Americans are badly served by rogue leaders. Bush and Rumsfeld constitute a true 'axis of evasion', with their manipulation of the facts about the war on terror. By jangling soundbites together, for example, Bush has managed to convince seven out of ten Americans that there is a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Yet there are Americans who are alert to the effects of US foreign policy and who object to Bush's world-view. Dennis Kucinich, a Democratic congressman, is one of a growing number of politicians speaking out against 'the Patriot games, the mind games, the war games of an unelected president and his unelected vice-president'. Families of the 11 September victims have criticised Bush for co-opting their dead relatives into his war on terror. For the first time, credible opponents are emerging from the Democratic Party and voicing important questions about the Bush administration's wars. With the noise of the Baghdad bombs in the distance and news of rising unemployment too loud for comfort, the president's approval rating is falling steadily and now stands below 50 per cent.

All too often, the doctrine of rogue states fails to distinguish between presidents and people. The many millions who make up the United States add up to more than their government's foreign policy. Americans have a strong tradition of activism against wrong and oppressive ways of life - campaigns for civil rights for women, African Americans and other minorities all emerged from the US, as did the environmental protection movement. The strength of these movements is testimony that when the American people act decisively, the US can be an enormous force for good. It is not impossible that Americans will draw on this tradition to reshape US foreign policy.

Around the world, people recognise American freedoms, which is why the longest queues for visas are always outside the US embassy. In the past 20 years immigration to the US has nearly doubled, with the biggest increases among non-white, non-



Judaeo-Christian immigrants. In 2000, more than one in ten people in America was foreign-born. These new Americans are particularly well placed to observe how far short of her ideals America falls. The writer Bharati Mukherjee describes her 'complicated relationship with the US'; whilst she is critical of 'America's outsized military, cultural and economic role',

the deepest loyalty I have yet discovered has been to the US constitution and its guarantee of civil rights. Let us stipulate that its shining promises have been abused throughout American history, and will continue to be, given the venality of Congress, but those rights have prevailed. The sovereignty of the individual, Thoreau's notion that every citizen constitutes a majority of one, independent of Congress, is still the most powerful social, political and even literary ideal I have ever encountered.

On paper, the United States champions 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' for every individual. In practice, these ideals have been assaulted as long as they have existed. This gap is the messy middle between the conflicting views of America as the country that God blessed and as the ultimate rogue state. Acknowledging some of the enormous potential for good inherent in the US does not make you a fully paid-up member of the Bush axis. We must not forget past foreign-policy crimes (ours as well as theirs) but calling the US a rogue state is the wrong way to go about changing American behaviour and will do nothing to help create a better world order.

What is the solution? Critics of the original rogue-state policy provide part of the answer - critical engagement. That means exhorting the US to set foreign policy according to its democratic ideals and the international standard of human rights. This may sound utopian, and undoubtedly it will be a struggle to achieve it in practice. However, the creation of a safer, fairer world will be inaugurated not by naming rogue states, but by reforming states.

Jennifer Rankin is the winner of the 2003 Webb Essay Prize, awarded by the Foreign Policy Centre in association with the New Statesman and the Webb Memorial Trust. The subject was: 'Is the US a rogue state?' The judges were Rt Hon Chris Smith MP; Anne McElvoy, executive editor, London Evening Standard; Ziauddin Sardar; Mark Leonard, director of the Foreign Policy Centre; Richard Rawes of the Webb Memorial Trust; and Peter Wilby, editor of the New Statesman.