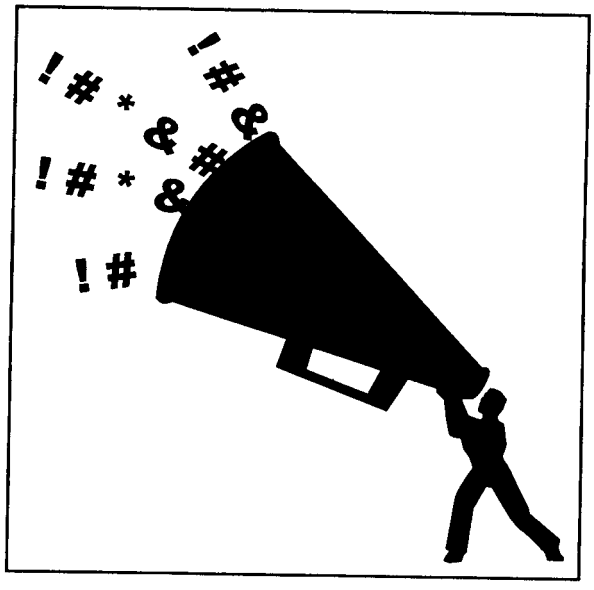
WHO IS JOEL ROGERS?

CHARLES J. SYKES



"We'd like an honest, civil, public-spirited discussion," University of Wisconsin Professor Joel Rogers wrote in the *Wisconsin State Journal* in June.

Through his nonprofit and ostensibly non-partisan think tank, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Rogers is arguably Wisconsin's most influential intellectual, often shaping the agenda of public policy debates. He is one of UW's most honored faculty members and he makes no secret that he has a (liberal) political agenda.

Even so, Rogers has forged alliances not merely with organized labor, but also with major business groups and has won financial backing for his causes from state and local governments as well as major mainstream foundations. He even cites former Governor Tommy Thompson as one of his fans.

"We don't expect or even hope that people will put aside all differences," he wrote in June, previewing his push for higher state taxes on businesses and the rich, "That's democracy. But we are hoping to up the tone and rationality of the present debate, which is what a functioning democracy requires."

But Rogers has not always been so concerned about upping the tone of civil debate. [WARNING: Graphic language ahead.]

"Evil motherf*ers"**

Speaking to a group of progressive activists in Washington, D.C., on April 12, 2002 — seven months and day after 9/11 — Rogers lashed out at the Bush administration and Republicans in general as "criminals," "ruthless motherf***ers," and "evil motherf***ers."

"These people are bad," Rogers told attendees at the Reclaiming America Conference.

> They stole the presidency. Now they're in the process of stealing the rest of the country. They dominate the major organs of government. They wish to enthrall us and embark us on another 40-year war.

His diatribe continued:

> They're cruel. They're vicious. They have no shame. They are criminals, basically, who are in the land, running it and chok-

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> ing the breath of conscience and good cheer. Or, in social science expression, they are ruthless motherf***ers.
>
> Whatever their cheerful demeanor, I think we should keep that in mind. These people are bad. I don't use the word "evil" loosely. Let's use it now. Let's just call them evil motherf***ers.
>
> They are really bad people. They are taking apart the government. They are taking apart the country. . . .
>
> They are willing to do anything. They're just looting. . . .

Even allowing for some theatrical hyperbole on Rogers' part, his performance was remarkable, especially given the contrast to his persona back home as a respected academician, public policy advocate, and mainstream liberal activist.

But that is just one face of Joel Rogers.

America, Rogue Nation

Days after the September 11 attack, while the wreckage of the World Trade Center still smoldered, Rogers wrote in *The Nation* magazine:

> [O]ur own government, through much of the past 50 years, has been the world's leading "rogue state."
>
> Merely listing the plainly illegal or unauthorized uses of force the U.S. was responsible for during the long period of Cold War, and continued during the past decade of "purposeless peace" assassinations, engineered coups, terrorizing police forces, military invasions, "force without war," direct bombings, etc. would literally take volumes.
>
> And behind that list reside the bodies of literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of innocents, most of them children, whose lives we have taken without any pretense to justice.

Even as rescue workers searched for victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Rogers wrote:

> As Amnesty International summarized in the mid-90s: "Throughout the world, on any given day, a man, woman, or child is likely to be displaced, tortured, killed, or "disappeared", at the hands of governments or armed political groups. More often than not, the United States shares the blame."

Rogers' post-9/11 attacks on American policy were singled out by *New York Post* columnist John Podhoretz as an example of the "moral idiocy" of the fashionable left in the wake of the terrorist attacks.

In calling America a "rouge nation," wrote Podhoretz, Rogers' article rivaled anti-American polemicist Susan Sontag in its

> loathsomeness — though it is perhaps more loathsome because at least Sontag doesn't offer little bromides about how terrible the events were last week. Rogers does, but he also wants to spit on his country too.

Of Rogers' claim that the United State was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, "if not millions, of innocents, most of them children, whose lives we have taken without any pretense to justice," Podhoretz wrote: "This is mindless, lawless, self-hating nonsense."

As incendiary as Rogers' comments were, no similar criticism was ever published in any publication — newspaper, magazine, or broadcast outlet — in Rogers' home state.

In fact, no local media reported on his post-9/11 denunciation of America as a "rogue nation," and none ever published a word about his obscenity-laced-rant in 2002.

Joel Rogers, Icon

Joel Rogers plays a unique role in Wisconsin politics. As an academic and an activist, he has achieved an almost iconic status as the intellectual guru to a myriad of causes and movements. A one-time recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, Rogers has been named by *Newsweek* magazine as one of the 100 Americans most likely to shape U.S. politics and culture in the 21st century. The honors keep rolling in.

Earlier this year, Rogers, a professor of law, political science, and sociology at UW-Madison, won the prestigious Hilldale Award, for excellence in teaching, research and service. He is also a contributing editor for *The Nation* and *Boston Review*, and his resume lists him as the author of "more than 200 articles and books" on democratic theory, American politics, and comparative public policy.

But Rogers' political influence is felt most powerfully through his role as founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), based at the University of Wisconsin.

In its own literature, COWS says it

> prides itself on the "Wisconsin Idea": the use of University resources — in concert with state government and community, labor, and business leaders — to improve existing social arrangements and policy through bold, informed experiment.

Because COWS is part of the UW, the group's website says,

> COWS inherits the University's nonprofit status and is a strictly non-partisan educational and charitable institution. We have a small full-time research and administrative staff, supplemented by research assistants, field organizers, and faculty associates who work on a project basis.

Rogers, who carefully chronicles his accolades, cites encomiums from business leaders and even former Governor Tommy Thompson who is quoted as describing Rogers' organization as "the Wisconsin Idea in action."

Labor leaders are even more enthusiastic. AFL-CIO president John Sweeney says of Rogers:

> From living wage campaigns to high-road economic development, working capital strategy to open-source organizing, metro unionism to the importance of regional political alliances, nobody outside the American labor movement has shaped our present strategy as profoundly as Joel Rogers.

Rogers has been extraordinarily successful in building partnerships with state business groups for initiatives like the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership and Jobs With a Future. Not only is his organization supported by state and local government grants, Rogers' activities are also underwritten by private foundations, including the Brittingham, Annie E. Casey, Nathan Cummings, Evjue, Ford, Joyce, Rockefeller, and Russell Sage. According to the groups' website, he has also secured contracts for work with the City of Madison, the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, and the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin.

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In Milwaukee, Rogers' group works closely with one of the city's most prominent business groups, the Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC) on the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, which is also funded by national foundations and supported by state and local matching funds. In addition to the GMC, the Initiative works with the Milwaukee County Labor Council and other community groups ostensibly to create partnerships "in manufacturing, hospitality, printing, health care, construction, utilities, and telecommunications . . . to connect qualified central-city residents to family-sustaining jobs."

Higher taxes, more regulations

The credibility Rogers retains in the business community is especially ironic, given his contention that businesses aren't taxed or regulated nearly enough.

Rogers has been among the most prominent advocates for the so-called living wage that requires businesses working with government to pay a super-minimum wage to employees. He is also one of the state's most outspoken critics of privatization of government services, which he calls the "redistribution of wealth upward."

Most recently, however, Rogers has taken a high-profile leadership role in opposing attempts to rein in state spending and taxes. In articles and op-ed pieces widely reprinted around the state, Rogers ridicules the notion that Wisconsin is a "tax hell," dismissing even the idea that taxes here are even out of line.

In one guest column in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Rogers labeled as "nonsense" concerns that:

> Wisconsin government spending and employment are both vastly above national averages, that the tax burden on business is particularly excessive and that public spending in general is hurtful to the economy . . . All nonsense.

In a drumbeat of articles, conferences, and papers, Rogers insists that Wisconsin government spending is only slightly above the national state average and isn't all that big in comparison with other states. In particular, Rogers wants to shift the debate from reducing the overall tax burden to making it even more progressive. He wrote last year:

> The tax burden in Wisconsin is not equally shared, and Wisconsin taxes aren't progressive, but regressive, with the rich actually paying a much smaller share of their income in state and local taxes than the poor.

Rather than talking about cutting government spending, Rogers argues that the debate over future of taxes should be about "tax fairness, and adequacy, and first and foremost, about what sort of a government role in society we're willing to pay for, and why."

In June, with great fanfare, Rogers' group released a poll that claimed that nearly 60% of state voters would support a combination of tax increases and spending cuts as an alternative to deeper cuts in services. Tracking with Rogers' agenda, the poll found that a majority of those responding would favor closing business tax loopholes, taxing some exempt goods and services, and raising cigarette taxes. The poll also found that 75% of voters backed an income tax "surcharge" on residents who earn more than $200,000 a year.

The results were presented at a conference co-sponsored by COWS and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. Other sponsors included AARP, AFSCME, The League of Women Voters, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin Counties Association, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the Wisconsin Education Association Council.

Underlining it's mainstream image, participants at the conference included elected officials from around the state, representatives of the Doyle administration, and staffers from the *Wisconsin State Journal, La Crosse Tribune,* and other major news media, who appeared on various panels.

None of the stories reporting on the COWS poll applied any ideological label either to Rogers or his group. While conservative organizations are routinely labeled, Rogers and COWS are seldom described as liberal, progressive, or left-wing by the media.

A *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* story in July on health care costs, for example, describes COWS only as "a public policy think tank at the University of Wisconsin-Madison."

But that may be because Rogers does not fit neatly into mainstream ideological labels.

New Party

Besides founding COWS as a quasi-academic think tank, Rogers was also the intellectual and organizational parent of an openly radical political party, dubbed "The New Party."

Arguing that the Democratic Party has been insufficiently radicalized, Rogers has written:

> One of the best kept secrets in American politics is that the two-party system has long been brain-dead. . . . The two party system would collapse in an instant if the tubes were pulled and the IVs were cut. The current parties will not, and cannot, reform a system that drastically needs overhauling.

Progressives should pull the plug on the Democrats, he argues, because they have become a party "that gets more excited about fighting for free trade agreements and the interests of high-tech companies than fighting for worker rights."

An umbrella for a motley collection of left-wing groups, Rogers' New Party declares that: "Democracy in America does not work today. The people do not rule."

Its statement of principles is largely standard progressive/left-wing boilerplate:

> Full employment, a shorter work week, and a guaranteed minimum income for all adults; a universal "social wage" to include such basic benefits as health care, child care, vacation time, and lifelong access to education and training; a systematic phase-in of comparable worth and like programs to ensure gender equity.

But some of its agenda is edgier:

> The democratization of our banking and financial system — including popular election of those charged with public stewardship of our banking system, worker-owner control over their pension assets, community-controlled alternative financial institutions.

The movement is not merely academic. Describing the New Party as Rogers' "brainchild," an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* described the New Party as committed to the idea that "property rights are unequally distributed under capitalism" and has joined with unions to promote super-minimum wage initiatives in various cities.

In Madison, Progressive Dane is a New Party affiliate and claims nearly half of the city council seats.

The *Wall Street Journal's* John Fund has also noted the party's fringier alliances. "The New Party has raised funds for Representative Bernie Sanders, the only self-proclaimed socialist in Congress, and its members include two of the five directors of the Committees of Correspondence, a group that broke away from the U.S. Communist Party in 1992." While Rogers was the party's national chairman, it's national organizer "was a long-time activist in the radical Teamsters for a Democratic Union. . . ."

Rogers argued that the left could actually exploit the war on terror to advance its agenda.

Rogers also takes seriously his role as an intellectual guru for the left as a whole. Two months after labeling America a "rogue nation," Rogers co-authored another, more upbeat assessment of the political opportunities of 9/11. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* with Katrina vanden Heuvel, the editor of *The Nation* magazine, Rogers suggested that the war "presents the opportunity of a lifetime" for the left.

In a piece that would be denounced by other progressives for its opportunism and cynicism, Rogers argued that the left could actually exploit the war on terror to advance its agenda.

"War's mobilization of the populace against a shared threat also heightens social solidarity, while underscoring the need for government and other social institutions that transcend or replace the market . . .," they wrote. "In brief, Sept. 11 has made the idea of a public sector, and the society that it serves, attractive again."

But little of this is ever mentioned in the Wisconsin media. As a result, it's highly unlikely that Rogers has had to explain his views to many of his business "partners" or his media sponsors.

A question of accountability

Rogers, however, enjoys no such immunity outside of Wisconsin.

In his post-9/11 column on Rogers', John Podhoretz noted that Rogers' views were not isolated.

> These views remain commonplace in the hallowed halls of academe. . . . And yet, no matter what they say, this nation will protect them. The military they abhor will go to war to keep them safe and free. The president and political leaders they condemn will make life-and-death decisions on their behalf.
>
> And one day, perhaps, they will awaken from their moral slumber and see the truth. Which would be the final reward they would receive from the United States of America, which has so bathed them in blessings.

The issue here is not Rogers' right to express such views, nor is there any question about his right to advance whatever agenda he chooses. But there is a legitimate question of accountability.

Granted, there were conservatives who have used (and probably still use) intemperate, unhinged, and hateful language to refer to Bill Clinton and other Democrats. Certainly, there are commentators and activists on the right who have indulged in extremist and paranoid speculations.

But it's hard to imagine that anyone delivering a right-wing screed about Democrats as evil motherf***ers would subsequently be regarded by the media, political, or academic world as a rational and respected voice of reason.

Nor is it likely that any conservative could drift as far to right as Rogers has to the left, without being labeled or ever called to account for their view. At the very minimum, they would have to explain why they present one face at home and a very different one elsewhere.

So far Joel Rogers hasn't had to do that.