

WAR IN OUR TIME



REFLECTIONS ON **IRAQ,**
TERRORISM AND WEAPONS
OF MASS DESTRUCTION

RAMESH THAKUR

War in our time: Reflections on Iraq, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction

Ramesh Thakur



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Introduction

Like the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the Iraq war is likely to be the defining issue that will shape the contours of world politics in the initial decades of the 21st century. It called into sharp relief many fundamental questions about the circumstances when force may justly be used overseas; when, to what degree and for how long, civil liberties and human rights may be curtailed in defence of national security; the extent to which international law may be set aside in pursuit of new age criminals like international terrorists; the wisdom of preemptive and preventive wars to forestall the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by outlaw regimes and nonstate actors; and the lawfulness and legitimacy of organizing international action outside the framework of the established institutions of global governance centred on the United Nations.

By the end of 2006, most Americans had rejoined the mainstream of international opinion in believing that the Iraq war was a mistake and not worth the cost in lives, American as well as Iraqi, and money. Their main interest was in how best to extricate the United States with the least resulting damage in the Middle East and to global US interests. This was reflected in the mid-term Congressional elections and then in the report of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. For many international commentators, the wonder was that it took Americans so long to wake up to the damage inflicted on the image, prestige and interests of the United States by a war of choice that was widely viewed as misconceived at best and mendacious at worst.

Yet a clear majority of Americans had supported the administration in

going after Saddam Hussein in 2003. The main intellectual and moral warrant was provided by an influential cast of intelligentsia who collectively came to be known as humanitarian warriors: an odd marriage of values and power between liberal internationalists who wanted to protect foreign citizens from atrocities perpetrated by their own governments and neoconservatives who believed in exercising American might internationally to protect American interests and project American values around the globe. When the Iraq adventure ran into a sandy quagmire, many public intellectuals who had been the chief cheerleaders blamed the outcome on flawed post-war plans for occupation, negligent mismanagement and criminal incompetence. Some even concluded that the Iraqis were not worthy of the lives and treasure expended by the Americans to liberate them from Saddam Hussein's tyranny and offer them the gift of US-style democracy.

This is disingenuous. The Iraq tragedy was richly foretold, by the millions who marched on the streets against the war before it began as well as by the governments which refused to join the narrow coalition of the willing who actually waged war. The honour roll of sceptical dissenters also included a few Americans, from William Pfaff of *The International Herald Tribune* to Paul Krugman writing in *The New York Times*. Uniquely in the 62-year history of the United Nations, I was given the latitude to write for public consumption on the contested topics of the day, making it clear that I was expressing my personal opinion. This collection brings together my writings on the set of issues associated with the raging debates over the Iraq war from the time of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 until the end of 2006. All but one were written for newspapers in Australia, Canada, Japan and India as well as *The International Herald Tribune*. The exception is the article published in the *United Nations Chronicle*, written jointly with Hans van Ginkel, Rector of the United Nations University (my boss). My time with the United Nations happened to coincide more or less with Kofi Annan's tenure and included a stint working for his second reform report. The collection ends with my tribute to him to mark the completion of his remarkable tenure as Secretary-General of the United Nations.

I begin with three scene-setting articles. The first is the destruction of the Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan in early 2001. There are two reasons for starting with this. It shows that the nature of the Taliban regime was well-known even before 9/11. And it makes the point that the destructive use to which religions' definition of "the other" can be put is not limited to Islamic fundamentalists. Of all my published material, this is the only one that identified my religious affiliation. The next article is a reflection on the paradox of why wars persist despite the almost universal yearning for peace. And the third is an article written in the immediate aftermath

of 9/11 that stands the test of time rather well. It is possible to combine intellectual toughness, moral clarity and an international social conscience, after all.

There is, in the collection, the occasional light-hearted article. But by and large the subject matter does not permit much levity and the issues are discussed and analyzed dispassionately and soberly. The events which prompted them are already history. But the issues discussed are important and retain a freshness and contemporary plus future relevance.

I am grateful to the publications concerned for permission to reprint the articles in this collection. While some of the material from the original versions has been removed in order to eliminate any duplication and repetition, and the language and style has been standardized to meet UNU Press guidelines, all relevant articles have been included, and no article has been modified by so much as a single word to realign it with subsequent events or interpretations.

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Uniquely in the 62-year history of the United Nations, Ramesh Thakur was given and exercised the latitude to write for public consumption on the contested topics of the day, making it clear that he was expressing his personal opinion. This book brings together a collection of Dr Thakur's opinion articles from a number of newspapers around the world: *The Australian*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Daily Yomiuri*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Hindu*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The Japan Times*, plus one article from the *UN Chronicle*. The book's three topics—the Iraq war, the war on terror, and weapons of mass destruction—are among the most critical issues of our times.

"I am a regular reader of Dr Ramesh Thakur's writings. I have been impressed by his clear thinking and analysis of world politics. Dr Thakur has challenged me many times to review my own thinking on important issues."

—*Martti Ahtisaari, former President of the Republic of Finland and Chairman of the Crisis Management Initiative*

"Ramesh Thakur has established a solid reputation for himself as an international public intellectual. The articles assembled in this book have contributed in no small measure to that achievement. Between them these articles show a keen understanding of the main currents of international affairs. Ramesh's subtle analysis is well served by an elegant and limpid writing style. Academics, diplomats, journalists as well as the wider public will all welcome the fact that these enduring essays have been brought together in one book."

—*Lakhdar Brahimi, former Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General*

"In recent years Ramesh Thakur has provided the world with brilliant commentary on the passing global scene. To have this wisdom and insight gathered in a single volume provides an invaluable resource that should be made required reading for leaders and citizens alike."

—*Richard Falk, Emeritus Professor, Princeton University*

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