

Any footnotes are shown at the bottom of each page
For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website.

Iraq invasion seen as a 'backward step'

Francis Bennion replied to the following letter written by Mr. Daljit Sehbai which appeared in the *Times* Letters page on 27 Aug 2004.

Sir, The invasion of Iraq, far from triggering modernisation (letter, August 24), has inflamed and emboldened the forces of religious fanaticism in a country that has been a secular state so far.

Saddam Hussein was not a religious fanatic. He was a cruel and ruthless dictator but, nevertheless, ran a secular state. He crushed those who wanted to establish an Islamic regime on the Iranian model. The forces of religious fanaticism led by Islamic militias, which had been dormant so far, have now taken over Najaf and other parts of the country and will pose a grave danger to the region.

International terrorism must be fought with maximum force and undivided attention. The war in Iraq was a diversion from the real struggle against terrorism, which is still alive and kicking in the border areas of Pakistan with Afghanistan.

If only half the number of American and British Forces employed in the invasion of Iraq had been sent into Afghanistan to fight the remnants of the Taleban and the fanatics led by Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, there was a very good chance of defeating or at least crippling the forces of international terrorism.

I believe the invasion of Iraq was a backward step in the fight against religious fanaticism and international terrorism, and a gross error of judgment on the part of George Bush.

Yours faithfully,

DALJIT SEHBAI,

c/o The Reform Club,
Pall Mall,
SW1Y 5EW.

FB's response sent on the same day was:

Mr Daljit Sehbai,
c/o The Reform Club,
Pall Mall,
SW1Y 5EW.

Dear Mr Sehbai,

I am writing about your important letter in today's *Times*. You have certainly hit the nail on the head. I am sure you are absolutely right in what you say.

Of course your letter is written with hindsight, but I can't help feeling that President Bush and his advisers (not to mention Prime Minister Blair and his) really should have grasped from the beginning the truth of what you say and refrained from toppling Saddam.

I supported the war, but I now see that Saddam acted as a stopper in one area of Islamist militarist activism. In the war against terrorism, that was more important than trying to introduce democracy into Iraq. I do not believe democracy will work in any country where the ayatollahs and imams are in political control. Turkey is different, but things are now going that way in Turkey too.

All the coalition can do now is try to uphold the new secular government under Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, and prevent the fanatical Islamists taking over. I fear it is a forlorn hope, though things may be better after the US and British elections. By then it may well be too late.

Yours sincerely,

Francis Bennion