

# Theorists take on the White House

**Events:** On 26 September 2002, as the Bush administration in the USA was stepping up preparations for the invasion of Iraq, 33 international relations scholars, most of whom identified themselves as realists, signed a *New York Times* advertisement warning that 'War with Iraq is *not* in America's national interest'. The signatories included prominent figures such as Kenneth Waltz (see p. 63), John Mearsheimer (see p. 241), Robert Jervis and Steven Walt. Their key point was that military force should not be used in these circumstances as Iraq posed no immediate threat to the USA. Other concerns that were raised included that the justifications being advanced for an invasion (that Iraq possessed WMD and that the Saddam Hussein regime had links to terrorist groups) were, at best, unproven; that an invasion could cause regional instability and would divert resources from the more important campaign against al-Qaeda; and that, without a plausible exit strategy, war against Iraq may involve significant costs for both invading forces and neighbouring states, whilst increasing anti-Americanism around the globe. Such warnings nevertheless came to nothing, as the Iraq invasion duly went ahead in March 2003.

**Significance:** On the face of it, the warnings issued by the realist scholars were remarkably prescient. Not only did the claims about WMD and terrorist links prove to be bogus, but, despite the speedy overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, hopes for the establishment of a non-sectarian democracy were soon abandoned as the Iraq War spiralled into a complex counter-insurrectionary struggle, becoming the largest, most costly and (apart from Afghanistan) the longest use of armed force by the USA since the Vietnam War. In addition to the 4,421 US service personnel who had been killed by August 2010, when the US combat mission ended, estimates of Iraqi deaths (both civilian and military) due to violence related to the war have been put as high as 600,000. Realist critics of the war nevertheless argued that even had it not proved to be so problematic, the Iraq War would still have been unnecessary. At a deeper level, realists used the Iraq War to draw attention to the danger that a hegemonic USA was over-reaching itself, risking provoking opposition by its heavy-handed use of power.

However, it is by no means clear that the Iraq War demonstrates that foreign policy-makers should listen



more closely to advice from the academy. In the first place, the Iraq War may have been a product of too much theory, not too little theory. The military assertiveness of the Bush administration was influenced, in large part, by a form of republican liberalism (or 'hard' Wilsonianism) that suggested that the spread of US-style democracy across the Middle East was the surest way of bringing peace and stability to that troubled region, even if this occurred through 'regime change'. The charge against the Bush administration, then, was not that it ignored the advice of theorists, but that it listened to the *wrong* theorists; in particular, it listened to neoconservative politicians and advisors rather than to realist academics (Mearsheimer 2005). Second, even if it were possible to determine which is the 'best' theory, it would by no means be easy to derive clear-cut policy strategies from a particular theory. This is because, in view of their breadth and complexity, all theoretical traditions embody some measure of ambiguity. The Iraq War, for instance, could be said to have reflected, rather than clashed with, realist principles, insofar as it was designed to deter challenges to the USA by redressing the image of a weakened post-9/11 USA. Finally, as realists claim to see the world 'as it is', rather than as they would 'like it to be', it could be argued that such a stark gap between theory and practice raises questions about the value of the realist project itself.