

Living in a state of terror

Rowan Williams reviews *Terror and Consent: the Wars for the 21st Century* by Philip Bobbitt

Armies are always preparing, so the saying goes, to fight the last war rather than the next one. Philip Bobbitt's enormous, courageous new book is basically a long reflection on what it might take to jolt us out of this habit, given that, as he argues with passion and erudition, we are in the middle of a major change in the global constitutional settlement and that this change is also one of the factors making us vulnerable as never before to violent destabilisation.

This constitutional change is what he described in an earlier book, *The Shield of Achilles*, as the shift from the nation-state to the "market-state".

The legitimacy of a government, its assumed right to be obeyed in its directions, used to rest on its capacity to protect and nurture a fairly closely defined national sovereign unit, by the management of economic growth and public welfare internally, and secure defence externally. Increasingly, this is changing to a situation where legitimacy rests on a government's ability to maximise the choices of its citizens.

Centralised welfare is no longer at the heart of such a project, nor is the balancing of a national economy: national economies are inextricably bound up with the global market, and citizens will seek the best deal for themselves within the options available both privately and publicly. The state is now a "porous" reality in all sorts of ways.

This is neither a prescription for a desirable future nor a lament for lost values. It is simply an observation about where we are headed, on the basis of a candid examination of various social trends. But the importance of the analysis is that it highlights the radically changing nature of war in such a context.

Up to the end of the "Long War" of the 20th century between democratic and totalitarian states, the assumption was that war was fought between geographically distinct adversaries, by means of large-scale armaments and professional standing forces, and that its conclusion was by means of a peace publicly concluded between the parties.

No longer. The information explosion and the globalisation of markets have proved to be the perfect vehicles for a new style of terrorism - a terrorism no longer about localised protest for political ends, but aimed at the dissolution of an entire culture of political consent.

Pluralism, negotiation and the rule of law as constantly evolving through public discernment and discussion, are all placed in jeopardy by the terrorists' goal of creating what Bobbitt calls a "state of terror" - that is, a system of government maintained by unchallengeable authority and enforced by internal violence.

Yet the state of terror is itself, bizarrely, a "market state", arguing its legitimacy by claiming to give its citizens exactly what they both want and need, which is the security of always being able to choose what is guaranteed to be good.

And the porous character of the modern state, combined with internet technology, means that, en route to the creation of states of terror, it is possible for a "virtual state" to be created.

This is a state with no centralised bureaucracy, no official armed forces, no geographical heartland - only an endlessly flexible and mobile fighting force, able to construct high-damage, low-cost "weapons" (including hijacked planes) calculated for maximal civilian damage, and able also to display in the global theatre of electronic communication a series of carefully staged atrocities to individuals.

Al-Qa'eda, Bobbitt claims, is such a virtual state; and the conventions of warfare as they have been learned thus far cannot touch it.

He is adamant that, none the less, we still need to use the language of war; and the greater part of the book proposes some of the ways in which "states of consent" should adapt to the new situation. As he cheerfully admits, there is something here to offend practically everyone.

The Left will be uncomfortable with his robust defence of preventative action and streamlined intelligence gathering; the Right will be shocked by his uncompromising critique of current assumptions about national sovereignty and his insistence that enforceable international law, shaped by clear strategic doctrine, must overrule the "opaque" concept of sovereignty that has prevailed in the past century and more. (This has seen the relation of states to each other as like that of individuals within the nation-state, with non-interference as the bottom line.)

It is not only global terror that makes the old model increasingly useless, he argues; it is also the transnational impact of natural disaster and epidemic. These can be as destabilising as terror itself (and can be exploited by terrorists); they can destroy infrastructure and civil society and so undermine the possibility of a politics of consent.

And so a state that, for example, ignores a major epidemiological crisis becomes liable to international police response, just as much as a state that perpetrates systematic human rights abuses.

What has been happening in Burma in the past two weeks painfully shows the intersection of these issues; humanitarian crisis within an already repressive political context reinforces the dissolution of ordinary civil society and stability.

Those who have read Bobbitt as some sort of apologist for American hegemony because of his early support for intervention in Iraq will be surprised to read his fierce and detailed dissections of the crass failures of coalition policy.

He notes the confusion of intelligence gathering and analysis that has bedevilled US planning, including the shared US and UK fiasco over weapons of mass destruction; he pinpoints the weakness of a military strategy almost wholly oblivious to what

would be required to rebuild civil society in Iraq, observing that, when victory is won, the primary need is for a policing function in a disintegrating society.

He is still, on balance, convinced that the overthrow of Saddam was desirable for strategic reasons (at some point the regime would have obtained WMDs), but grants that there is an argument to be had about this.

And he is insistent that the cavalier treatment of the processes of law by the Bush administration has done almost irreparable damage to the moral credibility of the struggle against al-Qa'eda.

Once a "state of consent" abandons legality, as at Guantánamo, it is fatally compromised. Hence the need to address any arguably necessary restrictions on civil freedoms in the face of terror strictly through a transparent process of argument and a clear demonstration of how law and strategy can work together without either being sacrificed.

This is anything but an uncontroversial book, but it is one of the most important works you are likely to read this year.

Bobbitt's painstaking rebuttal of Alan Dershowitz's argument for some limited legitimation of torture is excellent; his spelling out of what would be needed for the reconstruction of a wrecked society ought to be required reading in the British and American corridors of power; and his argument for rethinking sovereignty, or at least redefining it in what he calls "transparent" terms, is one of the very, very few clear statements I have seen of what might be demanded by the growing number of issues to which national boundaries are irrelevant - disease as well as terror.

There are loose ends, even in a book of this size.

Government is bound to be concerned with public strategy and, even in the market state, with some measure of corporate security; how then does it work with actors for whom these things are not priorities? I wanted more about how governments and transnational business could work together coherently in the climate Bobbitt describes.

And I wondered what if any restriction his models might entail for a world of global newsgathering and communication that is almost inevitably indifferent to the delicacies of strategy as he understands it. I suspect, too, that his list of countries where US intervention has been decisive for the triumph of democracy (Nicaragua? South Korea? Lebanon?) will read as a bit Panglossian to some.

But the thrust of the book, for all its express commitment to the primacy of the US as a global gatekeeper for political "consent", is an immensely powerful argument for a new regime of international law and an effective system of democratic alliances for the sharing of intelligence and of peacekeeping and reconstructive resources.

It is also, like his earlier book, written with remarkable literary grace. (Occasionally, one sees a frustrated novelist peeping through in the vividness of the scenarios for possible future crises.) And behind its pragmatic and unsparing struggles with how we are to manage all this frighteningly rapid change, there lies, not too surprisingly,

and very lightly sketched, an Augustinian Christian sense of the tragic obligation to achieve even a temporary and flawed good in the face of endemic untruthfulness and evil, within as well as without.

We may fail, in other words, but we shall not have let ourselves be quite captured by illusion and selfishness.

Whether the reader agrees or not, this is a quality that puts Bobbitt's work in a class rather apart from most essays on international affairs; the level clarity of its exposition allows us to look through into a depth that is neither consoling nor despairing but patiently hopeful.