

A full-page photograph of a soldier in camouflage gear and a helmet, holding an assault rifle. He is standing in a paved area in front of a large mosque with a prominent blue and gold dome and minarets. The sky is clear and blue.

Luc Debieuvre

A  
**SAFER**  
World ...?

With a foreword by  
Abdul Hamid, Editor-In-Chief of the *Gulf News*

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*Who can deny that we now live in a safer world ...?*  
*George W. Bush*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Luc Debieuvre is a French national who lives in Paris and travels frequently to the Middle East, where he has also been posted. A law graduate (Panthéon Sorbonne, Sciences Po), he spent his career in banking, most recently as head of an Arab bank in Paris. Between 2003 and 2005, he wrote fortnightly chronicles for the UAE-based *Gulf News*, one of the most influential English-language Arab dailies in the Gulf. He is also a board member of the Institute for International and Strategic Research (IRIS), a Paris-based think-tank.

## FOREWORD

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A mutual friend approached me in 2003 saying that Luc Debieuvre was interested in writing a column for *Gulf News*. On asking about his background I was informed he was a banker, not a journalist.

I was surprised. Not surprised because a Frenchman wanted to write for an English-language newspaper published in the Arabian Gulf, but because here was an accomplished and well-known banker, keen to analyse and comment on international affairs and politics, and not just limit his writing to finance and economics.

Accustomed to receiving such requests from journalists, academics and columnists, I was intrigued by Luc's offer and decided to take him up on it. In the post-9/11 world, global politics and the relationships between East and West, North and South, rich and poor, Christianity and Islam, have been in a state of flux. To my mind, someone unconnected with the media establishment and looking at the issues from a different perspective could bring freshness and clarity to the opinion pages of *Gulf News*.

That judgment was spot-on. In his columns published in *Gulf News* over a period of 18 months, Luc Debieuvre fostered a lively debate and commented on the issues of the day in an inimitable and incisive manner. Not subscribing to stereotypical views and beliefs, he enlarged the debate by exploring different avenues of thought and brought a uniquely European flavour to the table. His writing stimulated discussion and prompted considerable reader interest, as evidenced by the large number of people who wrote in to the newspaper in response.

The period of Luc's association with *Gulf News* has been among the most significant and memorable in recent history. The aftermath of America's War on Terror that brought in its wake the events in Afghanistan and the continuing misadventure in Iraq has unleashed forces that the world will have to contend with and endure well after the protagonists have left the stage. Perhaps it was these events and the West's motivations in driving them that motivated Luc Debieuvre to comment on these matters.

The continuing turmoil in the Middle East, the Palestinian struggle and the impact of this volatile region on the global economy will

undoubtedly continue in the months and years to come and I hope Luc Debievre will continue to analyse and unravel their intricacies in the future.

In this book, an attempt has been made to collate and present to readers in one convenient package 18 months of Luc's writings in *Gulf News*. In this laudable venture I wish him all success.

Abdul Hamid Ahmad  
Editor-In-Chief  
*Gulf News*  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## INTRODUCTION: TWO YEARS LATER ...

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A fortnightly chronicle provides a much better opportunity than a daily commentary to look at an event with some distance, placing it within a wider reasoning process which can help us to understand it while simultaneously linking it to the current course of events. The republishing of such chronicles would therefore be nothing more than the recording of an instant testimony, something weighted with the feeling of the moment and, at best, a possible source of information for future historians wishing to explain how a specific event was understood or analysed the day it took place.

Why, then, should these fifty-two articles be gathered together in the same book, if they were intended only to be current reactions in which interest would disappear as the underlying events pass by?

There may be many explanations, not least the basic difference that exists between a book and a newspaper. Books survive, whereas time seems to consume newspapers. Any author willing to see the insuperable heights of his thoughts engraved forever in the marble of a written testimony aimed at future generations will opt for a book. It is the cheapest way to satisfy an ego, and authors have egos. But, more seriously, there are two main reasons to proceed this way.

First, a succession of apparently different events may constitute the sequences of a single major event that ultimately becomes defined by all these developments and latest outcomes. It puts itself within a wider context progressively defined by such input. As an example, each chronicle devoted to a specific aspect of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict becomes an element of a more global history about the Palestinian fight for freedom. Each article is linked to another one and helps to describe a global situation, explain a cause and foresee a likely future. The virtue of repeating should not be forgotten either. “The only democracy in the Middle East”, as some people like to name it, practises a continued violence which tends to go unnoticed, precisely because it continues. It is therefore important to show it relentlessly, to denounce it again and again, and never to allow good feeling people to fall asleep with the insurance of their own conscience being at peace, simply because

they are unable to do anything about it and eventually become accustomed to it.

Second, a columnist is someone who takes a risk – intellectually, at least. It is true to say that sometimes these risks seem to be rather safe ones, as few people tend to remind us what was said of an event a few months after it occurred. A well-known French analyst, now heading one of the major French think-tanks, made himself notorious when he predicted that former President Bush Senior would never intervene in the Gulf. Another analyst, who writes weekly apparently unbiased chronicles on any historical or political matter in the French daily *Le Figaro*, did even better when predicting both that Bush Junior would not invade Iraq and that Senator John Kerry would win the presidential election. Back to a not-so-distant past, I'm also reminded of the cover page of the French daily *Le Monde*, dated 30 April 1975: "In Phnom Penh, a cheering crowd welcomes its liberators." After such an exploit, any outside observer would feel some kind of embarrassment and could think that a certain dignity would commend them to keep quiet for a while, or at least to apologise to their readers. After all, who doesn't make mistakes? But some people don't; they continue to write and tell the world their version of the truth. This is a rather common practice in countries like France, where people are divided between the official thinkers, and the rest. The so-called intellectuals and other official specialists know what they are talking about, by definition. They hardly accept dissonance; look at the furore that accompanied the publishing of Pascal Boniface's (founder and director of IRIS) book *Est-il permis de critiquer Israël?* (Are we allowed to criticize Israel?) (Editions Robert Laffont, 2003). Dr Boniface, a former adviser for international affairs of the French Socialist Party (PS), wrote an internal note and then later a book about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. He fell victim of a truly organized campaign against him in the press on the grounds of anti-Semitic behaviour.

As for members of the "civil society", they are kindly requested to stand by and keep quiet. Yet reading, listening, exchanging views and experience is something that can easily occur in addition to a daily professional occupation. In this respect, it has been a great honour, indeed a great pleasure, that *Gulf News* has readily welcomed my columns. But it has been an even greater satisfaction to see that many of my earlier comments, analyses and predictions, have proven, with time, to be true – however unfortunate in some cases. The American war in Iraq has

been a terrible example in this respect. We never gave credit to the false reasons put forward to justify a pre-emptive war by an administration which had already made its decision; we hardly believed that the Americans would be welcome as liberators by the population as a whole, especially if they were about to stay for a while; we could not imagine that the war would be over in June 2003 nor that the US could end it with its currently available forces; most importantly, we did not accept the concept of unilateralism, not because it would be arrogant and counter-productive, but because we found it fundamentally inefficient. “They can make the war alone but they will need the rest of the world to make the peace,” French President Jacques Chirac said at the time. The present situation in Iraq is no reason for satisfaction, the famous “I told you so”. But it is no reason either to keep quiet just because one has been proven right. In the 2003 autumn issue of the French magazine *Politique Internationale*, Amin Taheri explained, one by one, the reasons why the US was legally authorised to go to war in Iraq and why the war was going to be a success. The reasons were false and the results are what we know. At the same time, other people held different conclusions, and they were right. A year and a half later, this book is a tribute to them.

Among the most debilitating ideas put forward by George W. Bush’s first administration, the concept of the “Broader Middle East initiative” takes the lead. Imposing democracy by force, starting an election process when people have no work, no food and no security, lining up each and everybody along the same Western pattern supposed to be the world standard, deciding on behalf of others what is good or bad for them – all this is simply stupid and arrogant. But, more importantly, it can have devastating effects upon those in the region who have been working step by step towards democracy – a reasonable march, unhurried and suiting local characteristics, enabling the concept to take its roots genuinely. Besides those rulers in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and elsewhere who are the new political pioneers of the Arab world, one institution can play a major role in the implementation of democracy so much better than Mrs Condoleezza Rice’s ukases: the press. Therefore, before readers return to the chronicles collected in this book and let their imaginations work again, let me tell them how bright some futures may be in the region as long as institutions like *Gulf News* continue to work the way they have done thus far.

My thanks go not just to this institution but to all those who play an outstanding role in offering freedom of speech and promoting democracy.

Luc Debievre, July 2005

**2003**

**A YEAR OF LIES**

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## TIMELINE WORLD NEWS 2003

- 21 JANUARY: France and Germany declare they are opposed to any war in Iraq.
- 27 JANUARY: Baghdad refuses to accept disarmament.
- 14 FEBRUARY: UN inspectors say they can't find any banned arms in Iraq.
- 27 FEBRUARY: Iraq claims it will destroy its missiles.
- 1 MARCH: The Arab League makes public that it opposes war in Iraq.
- 15 MARCH: There are rallies across the world in protest at an impending war in Iraq.
- 17 MARCH: US President George W. Bush tells Saddam Hussein that he has 48 hours to leave Iraq, or there will be a military invasion.
- 19 MARCH: Saddam Hussein does not leave. The US enter war with Iraq.
- 4 APRIL: US troops break into Baghdad.
- 9 APRIL: US forces gain control of Baghdad.
- 1 MAY: Bush delivers televised address calling for an end to major combat in Iraq.
- 16 JUNE: The UK begins an enquiry into the so-called weapons of mass destruction.
- 3 JULY: Massive reward offered to Iraq by US for the capture of Saddam Hussein.
- 22 JULY: Saddam Hussein's sons killed after their hideout in Mosul is revealed.
- AUGUST: UN Secretary Kofi Anan issues several critical statements about the conduct of the war in Iraq by the US.
- 29 AUGUST: Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution, is killed in a bomb blast at Azzamiya mosque, Baghdad.
- 1 NOVEMBER: US says Iraqi handover to be speeded up.
- 3 NOVEMBER: Blasts hits Baghdad Green Zone. US Congress says budget for Iraq is OK.
- FALL 2003: For the first time, the EU plans and conducts military operations without recourse to NATO resources and capabilities in Macedonia and DR Congo.
- 14 DECEMBER: Saddam Hussein is captured.

## MATTER OF AUTONOMY AND THAT OF SURVIVAL

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6 MARCH 2003

The United States of America decided on it, and we are now contemplating the apparently unavoidable arrival of a war that this country wanted, and which was not imposed on it.

Throughout time, philosophers have endlessly discussed war, its possible legitimacy or absolute rejection. Other generations will pass on before a unanimous world defines what would be a just war. Others, who considered as a starting point war as an unavoidable phenomenon, have preferred to think of what could be the best way to win it. A supreme art has been to avoid war altogether. This in a certain way is what has underpinned the action of France these last months.

But how could one stick to these considerations when, in a horribly practical manner, France will have to take a position on the use of its right of veto at the Security Council: only those who don't play cards do not see the inanity of such debate. While this right does not have any meaning other than the one to exercise a threat, it puts whoever uses it into one or the other camp once the threat is executed. More simply, the question is to know whether France should or should not support the war, and those who make it.

A first anecdotal answer would be to say that since those who do not hesitate to fence off their country's policy in the columns of the *Wall Street Journal* recommend supporting it, it is vital to hold on.

With discussion among the political left being reduced to "No to war" because it is war, or "No to war" because on top of that it is a war against the Arabs, it lacks consistency. In a parallel reasoning, it would be "Yes to war" because Iraq is a danger for Israel. But Israel is also a danger for Palestine and, despite the fact that Israel has not respected the hundreds of resolutions voted for by the United Nations since 1967 compelling it to free the territories it has occupied in an illegitimate way through the use of force (there are no more than 18 resolutions relating to Iraq today), one hasn't yet gone to war against Israel. On the contrary,

discussions go on, moving forward as in Oslo or backward as with Ariel Sharon. It is obvious that war against Iraq has no factual justification, unless a new international law on intervention is decided on – the practical aspects of which would be nothing less than the opinion of the most powerful. Other dictators, unfortunately, oppress their people. Other states, unfortunately, go on representing a serious threat to the international community, and still the whole world is not permanently at war with them. Other elements thus led the United States to decide on that war: a declining relationship with Saudi Arabia, a willingness to control immense oil resources or to preach a new crusade, which used to be called a “colonial war”. However, isn’t the true question for us Europeans of a different nature? Are we not on the verge of reliving the Suez crisis of 1956, being alone at this time in front of the United States? And wouldn’t the war against Iraq be a simple lure when tolls the knell of Europe?

Indeed, what can the position of France be today and which space can be saved for it in the near future? One knows the international context. On the one hand, there are many of those countries which think that they cannot have the luxury of a completely independent policy and have no choice but to rely on the support of others, especially that of the United States. On the other hand, one also knows more or less the position of the Arab states in the region. Besides those whose freedom of speech is inversely proportional to the cover of their budget by the United States, many of these states are embarrassed by the position of France. Beyond an apparent solidarity, these states are managed by a governing minority elite who, for various reasons, decided long ago to stand by the United States, whereas public opinion, the so-called “Arab street”, becomes increasingly Islamic with each day that passes along the rhythm of Israeli exactions, thinking that aggression against an Arab entity is aggression against Islam. Most cleverly governed states in the region sail between these two reefs, fully aware of their limited room for manoeuvre. At least France, when in the Atlantic bosom, used to represent a nuance if not an alternative. In the case of total victory by the United States, France’s present position means it risks isolating itself in the region.

That said, the alternative is no more heartening. If victory by the United States is not total and military operations last longer than expected, or if there is an explosion of terrorist acts in the Middle East or worldwide, or if extremist Islam strengthens to the point that it may

become a governing power in some countries, France's situation is still no better. Some Arab states in the region justify their support of the United States under the pretext of the existence of a link between Iraq and Al Qaida: no honest observer can imagine any such link between Islamic fundamentalists and a substitute of exotic Stalinism. An explosion of fanaticism following the inception of a war in Iraq cannot be seen as a fantastic notion. The alternative for France would thus reduce it to following the United States in their crusade – probably in the uncomfortable situation of a last-minute alliance – or to pride itself on its virtue as a third world headlight of multipolarity, and peacefully wait for Islamic forces to gain power, although these will not respect it either.

Avoiding such extremes has been a driving force of our diplomacy in recent months, but deadlines get closer. And a graceful exit through Europe seems to be the only way to break this false logic imposed by the United States. When French industry is still wondering whether it has a chance to secure an arms supply contract in the region without realising the extent to which issues have changed, it is high time we distanced ourselves from that zone in order to return to the central point this war in Iraq would try and hide – that is, the nature of the relationship between Europe and the United States. The question for France is relatively simple: is it in its interest that a strong Europe develops, even though it opposes, albeit peacefully, other existing forces? Great Britain showed that a different choice could be made, which can be perfectly justified so long as one knows which camp one sits in. If the United States have worked so hard in recent months to divide Europe, this is precisely because they prefer to deal with isolated and smaller partners than with a united and consequently stronger partner. We like the United States and haven't forgotten the links we have with them. However, we may also have diverting interests, and we alone will be less and less in a position to protect them. This is why this war has revealed so much about international relationships in Europe, as we shall soon witness. A hardly born political union is already dead. It should thus be created again, on a fair basis this time, starting with a limited nucleus of states – Germany, Belgium, France, The Netherlands – that are prepared to agree on the main issues. It is a matter of autonomy, and thus of survival. This in order that a new Suez doesn't put an end to Europe and, in time, to France.