Signs of War
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INTRODUCTION

Anne-Marie Obajtek-Kirkwood
and Ernest A. Hakanen

Man is but a reed, the weakest in nature; but he is a thinking reed.

—Pascal

Pascal wrote this in the seventeenth century, celebrating man’s—and woman’s, one would add—capacity of thought. Human beings have always tried to make sense of the universe around them and of past and current events through various means, including “signs.” References to signs abound, such as these from the Old Testament: “And this shall be a sign unto thee from the Lord” (Isaiah 38:7); “Say, I am your sign” (Ezekiel 12:11), denoting that “semiotics” have been of use long before they ever constituted themselves as a critical and deciphering approach in the twentieth century.

Trying to understand is always more urgent and necessary when times are hard, troubling, unsettling, and destabilizing as in periods of latent conflict or of declared war. In this collection of essays on signs of war, three major wars are present. One belongs to the past—the war the United States waged in Vietnam—and the other two are still being waged either abroad or both abroad and on American soil. The current war abroad is the Iraq War and occupation that started in March 2003, which is the aftermath of the unsatisfactorily finished Gulf War of the early 1990s. To this current war in the Middle East can be added “the war on terror,” a consequence of September 11, 2001, that designates the attack in the United States on deeply symbolic targets to al-Qaeda: the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, “evocative of America’s economic dominance,” and the
Pentagon, “representing U.S. military power,” one of the ugliest forms of terrorism ever imagined. The ensuing and ongoing “war on terror” has the United States waging war on its own territory and abroad on mainly two fronts, Afghanistan and Iraq. Iraq did not harbor terrorists before March 2003 but has since become a stronghold for terrorists as a consequence of the initial 2003 onslaught. To these must be added whatever place the United States deems dangerous for their security, like Sudan in 2006.

In this context of war and signs, what is a sign? What can be interpreted as a sign? Dictionaries give us several definitions, like this first one: “an object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else.” Others include “something regarded as an indication or evidence of what is happening or going to happen”; “a gesture or action used to convey information or instructions”; “a notice that is publicly displayed giving information or instruction in a written or symbolic form”; “an action or reaction that conveys something about someone’s state or experiences”; and “a gesture used in a system of sign language.” To this can be added the tenth definition of the Webster dictionary online, which directly refers to linguistics and to what would then be imported into semiotics as “a fundamental linguistic unit linking a signifier to that which is signified” with this added indication by Saussure: “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.”

Signs analyzed in this volume fall into one or more of the definitions listed and can be visual, written, auditory, or a combination of these. They include political cartoons, photographs, car bumper stickers, ribbons, the American flag, Bush’s war rhetoric, newspaper editorials, blogs, underground press, prayer, and film. Pertaining to the wars mentioned previously, their origins are diverse in time and place; they are abundantly from the United States but also Canada (Québec), Mexico, Iraq, and several countries around the world in the case of films.

In times of war, sides may be quickly drawn. Supporters want to catch the enemy off guard, while dissenters want to stop aggression. Both sides know the importance of signs that represent their stance. These signs are a rallying point around which quick mobilization of the cause occurs. As a result, groups hasten to adopt a sign. The quick adoption of signs has many effects.
Recent events, especially the Iraq War, have demonstrated the explosion of signs used to represent the sides being taken. People not only draped themselves in the American flag or displayed yellow ribbons and bumper stickers on their cars, they also used a multitude of the same sign or combination of signs to emphasize their position. On another level, editorialists and cartoonists used slogans or stereotypes dug up from years past to depict their stance on the war.

All of these signs of war help people express their views with great simplicity and speed. Many were borrowed from previous conflicts in which a similar meaning was articulated. Others were new signs that were easily understood, for example, “these colors don’t run” referring to the colors of the U.S. flag. What was impressive was the speed at which they were chosen and used, sometimes with the help of corporations behind them. Even more puzzling was the fact that, in spite of their polysemic meanings, many signs were unquestioned as to their “real” meaning.

Contributors of this book provide answers to these questions of contradiction. Some signs, especially of the most mercantile and simplistic aspect like car stickers or flag-related paraphernalia, were chosen at times in haste for their simplicity or their vagueness, were adopted from past conflicts in history, or relied on stereotypes. These factors lead to analyses of their significance, purpose, impact, or interpretation at various levels of population, not only in the United States but also abroad in various countries, as one conflict initiated by one country unfortunately has a ripple effect that involves countries for and against the conflict-initiator and countries neighboring the country under siege or occupation. Whether analyses in this book bear on signs of iconic stature or whether they bear on more elaborate products of rhetoric, artistic, or literary design, they are all products of various times and places, created by human beings and perceived by other human beings. Having no intrinsic meaning except the interpretation that is grafted on them, their meaning is not absolute, not fixed in time and space, but changing and evolving as humans are. This is therefore an attempt at deciphering some signs of war in the flow of time and knowledge.

Notes

1. [L’homme n’est qu’un roseau, le plus faible de la nature; mais c’est un roseau pensant], Pascal, Pensées (1670), fragments 339, 346, 347, and
348, in L. Brunschvicg’s edition.
3. This definition and the following one, unless otherwise indicated, are all from the Apple Mac OSX integrated dictionary.