

# America's new civilizing mission

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*"Islam has long vanished from the stage of history, and has retreated into oriental ease and repose."*

—G.W.F. Hegel

**I**n a world that is dominated by violence emanating from organs of the state, including incidental and deliberate acts of violence against civilians, the attacks of 9/11 came as a shock. Momentarily, these attacks had reversed the customary roles.

A handful of non-state actors, wielding terrorist tactics, had challenged the world's most powerful state. The death toll from these attacks - for a single day - was grizzly at around 3000. Terrorist attacks by non-state actors on this scale would have provoked alarm under any circumstances, but the identity of the attackers and their target made them pregnant with historical consequences. These attacks were cataclysmic because their target was the United States, the only surviving superpower, and they were perpetrated by men from a part of the world — the Middle East — that contains oil, 'the single greatest strategic prize of history.'

These circumstances about the attacks of 9/11 instantly produced certain predictable theories about why the hijackers had chosen to attack the United States.

These theories played upon the identity of the attackers and their target, that is, who we are and who they are. That we are a free, prosperous, democratic and overwhelmingly Christian society; and they are evil Muslims from the backward swamps of the Arab world was the assertion.

The standard explanations of 9/11 constructed on these premises were simple. They had attacked us because they hate our freedoms, our prosperity, our democracy, and our Christian society. This explanation raised another question: what is it about them that motivates their hatred for us? The answer to this question was dredged from a collective memory of historical contests between Islamdom and Christendom — resuscitated in recent years by a new clique of influential Orientalists led by Bernard Lewis.

The American establishment argued that the attackers' hatred was fuelled by Islam, a religion that oppresses women, denigrates reasoning, stifles freedom of speech, discriminates against other faiths, and preaches eternal warfare against all Infidels. These stark contrasts between 'us and them' — as it turns out, contrasts essentially between good and evil — were readily accepted by many Americans. It is scarcely surprising that they were.

Historically, Islamdom has nearly always been the principal *Other* in the western dialectic of imagination, fear and domination. Over the past few decades, with the growing salience of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the re-entry of Islam into the politics of the Islamic world, and finally with the collapse of the communist challenge, a growing body of thought in the United States has sought to reclaim, to resurrect, this old western adversary.

More recently, Samuel Huntington has nested the western dread of Islam within his broader thesis of the clash of civilizations. He claims that most major conflicts occur across the fault line of civilizations; supposedly, these conflicts are deeply

the Islamic world. On the one hand, the attacks *per se* offered the *casus belli*. This was leveraged into a new kind of threat-terrorist attacks with WMDs — and this, apparently, demanded a war against terrorism, a cover for the United States to wage pre-emptive and preventive wars, to acquire military control over Middle Eastern oil fields, and to put the world on notice that no challenges to America's military dominance would be tolerated. The war on terrorism was a war to establish a global American empire.

At the same time, by setting the attacks of 9/11 within the framework of the clash of civilizations, the United States was also positioning itself for a deeper intervention in the Islamic world,

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rooted in human nature, in the instinctive urge of one society to fear and, therefore, subjugate the Other.

Although, Huntington identifies eight civilizations, which would allow for 56 paired conflicts between civilizations, he is primarily concerned with two: the conflict between the West, on the one hand, and Islamdom and China.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were gleefully seized by many in the United States as a fresh eruption of the clash of civilizations — between Islamdom and the West. Their enthusiasm was not dampened by the fact that the attackers were a handful of non-state actors, who most likely represented an extreme fringe of Islamic society.

The only thing that mattered was that the attackers were Muslims and the country targeted, the United States, was the core western country. This was irrefutable evidence of an ongoing clash of civilizations between Islamdom and the West.

Once the US establishment had cast the attacks of 9/11 in the framework of a clash of civilizations, the United States was ready for a radical engagement with

one that would go beyond regime change.

This neoconservative plan was revealed soon after the invasion of Iraq: it was promoted under the broad rubric of 'democratizing' the Middle East, if not the Islamic world. This is a plan to settle the problem of a recalcitrant Islamdom once and for all. Militarily, this calls for regime changes.

Politically, it maps a re-division of the Arab states into smaller, micro-states defined by religion, sectarian identity and ethnicity. Culturally, the Islamic world would be Americanized. The Evangelists are hoping to achieve more: convert the Muslims to Christianity. It is an ambitious plan, a dream plan, exceeding in breath and scope the French ambitions for the transformation of the Maghreb.

The American response to 9/11 — including the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the planting of military bases all over the Islamic world, and plans for attacking Iran — provides fuel to the campaign by Al Qaeda and its affiliates to energize the Islamic world to recapture its historical autonomy. The

American and Israeli designs on the Islamic world — so it appears to a growing number of Muslims — are even greater than they were before 9/11, when they preferred to dominate the Islamic world through surrogates. Their designs go further: they are now demanding that the Islamic world — and Islam itself — reform itself on American terms.

It is unsettling when one examines how the world has come to this. If official accounts of 9/11 are accurate, it would appear that a handful of men, with minuscule resources but using the tools of terrorism, have leveraged themselves into world players. It is difficult to see what 9/11 and America's response to it will ultimately produce. For now, it has deepened the power of America against Israel over the Islamic world.

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In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States failed to draw upon the military forces of its allies in the Islamic world to police the 'liberated' territories. Perhaps, this is the most visible shift in the temper of the Islamic world since the first Gulf War, when nearly every major Muslim country sent military contingents to support Americans in their war against Iraq.

Is Osama bin Laden "a master strategist" — as Justin Raimondo claims — who uses terrorist tools to achieve his objectives. Or is he clueless like Saddam Hussein, who blundered into Kuwait, apparently unaware that such a challenge to America's vital interests would not go unanswered, especially at a time when Soviet power was near collapse? Even now, Osama's gambit appears to have failed.

Although he succeeded in provoking an American invasion of a major Islamic country, this did not produce the reaction that he might have hoped would overthrow the tyrannies in the Islamic world.

Instead, the United States is planning to overthrow these tyrannies and replace them with others that will better serve American interests. President Bush has already effected two regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq. How many more regimes will go down this way? President Bush has another four years to make his plan work. Shall we wish the president luck? Or, instead, shall we wish Americans better luck? ■

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