

# Living with today's Caesar

*Dawn*  
*Middle East*  
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*30th June*

THE US victory in Iraq and its long-term consequences are being widely debated in the media and by the various think tanks around the world. The motives identified range from the control of Middle Eastern oil to safeguarding Israel's security.

Future predictions focus on the growing alienation between the western and the Muslim worlds, leading to more and not less terrorism in future. Some observers are more worried about the emerging global order, in which powerful countries can act unilaterally without the UN's endorsement to pre-empt possible (and not actual) threats to their security, thus destroying the postwar international diplomatic and political system, based on the UN Charter, providing for respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation state.

But in this fateful debate, one important dimension remains unexplored — the historical evolution of the western world and the intricate relationship between Europe and America.

The phenomenon that we are witnessing today was predicted almost half a century ago by the famous French writer, Amaury de Riencourt in his book published in 1957, under the title of "Coming Caesars". With remarkable foresight, he says in the introduction to his book:

"It is the contention of this book that expanding democracy leads unintentionally to imperialism and that imperialism inevitably ends in destroying the republican institutions of earlier days; further, that the greater the social equality, the dimmer the prospects of liberty, and that as society becomes

more egalitarian, it tends, increasingly, to concentrate absolute power in the hands of one single man.

"Caesarism is not dictatorship, not the result of one man's overriding ambition, not a brutal seizure of power through revolution. It is not based on a specific doctrine or philosophy. It is essentially pragmatic and untheoretical. It is a slow, often century-old, unconscious development that ends in a voluntary surrender of a free people escaping from freedom to one autocratic master"

Tracing the historical roots of the contemporary political scene, Mr Riencourt draws a distinction between culture and civilization. Culture grows in young societies, creating new values, artistic styles, new sciences, new legislatures, new moral codes and new intellectual and spiritual structures. It emphasizes individual rather than society, original creation rather than preserving the old. "Civilization, on the other hand represents the crystallization, on a gigantic scale, of the preceding cultures deepest thoughts and styles, basically uncreative and culturally sterile but efficient in its mass organization, practical and ethical, spreading over large surfaces of the globe, finally ending in a universal state under the sway of a Caesarian ruler.

In the light of this interpretation, Mr. Riencourt refers to the momentous phase of our contemporary history, when the European culture is evolving into the American civilization. "The twentieth century is the dramatic watershed separating the European culture that lies behind us from American civilization that lies ahead."

"Political power in the western world" he says, "has gravitated towards the United States

and id within the US, in the office of the President. The power of the President of the United States has grown with the growth of America and of democracy within America. He is at once the chief of the most powerful armed forces in the world; he is the only statesman in the western world who can make major decisions alone in an emergency. He is in control of de facto empire into which the scattered fragments of the dissolving British Commonwealth are being merged."

The positive driving force in this situation is neither political nor strategic; it is essentially psychological — the willingness to follow in any emergency, economic or military, the leadership of one man. This is in part a reflection of the growing mistrust of parliaments, congresses and representative assemblies in most societies.

This evolution has coincided with the "impulsive emotionalism of American public opinion which swings wildly from apathetic isolationism to dynamic internationalism". The American public wants to personalize issues and responsibilities and instinctively looks towards their sole leader to take them to victory against actual adversaries (like the Soviet Union) or imaginary foes (like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein).

Such concentration of power, Mr Riencourt reminds us, is no accident resulting from unexpected emergencies but the natural outcome of an historical evolution. "The approaching Caesars are no longer historical accidents, temporary tyrants or reactionary dictators who attempt to turn the clock back, all of whom are merely replicas of classical Greece's tyrants.

Those short-lived despots have

nothing in common with the Caesars who eventually will organize the universal empire toward which their civilization has been tending. The coming Caesars are the lethal product of centuries of historical evolution, each succeeding generation having unconsciously added its stone to the towering pedestal on which they are going to stand".

While this historical explanation of how President Bush is becoming the de facto Caesar of the 21st century and changing the course of our history is revealing, a more sobering part of Mr Riencourt's message concerns the future of our planet, "What happens today germinated generations ago. Yesterday's seeds are today's blossoms. We must recognize what kind of seeds we are sowing today if we want to know what tomorrow's blossom are going to be...

"Whereas in the past a new culture has always sprung from the ruins of an antecedent civilization and blossomed forth, the wreck of our own western civilization might well mean absolute death for the entire human race, what was only an episodic death in the past might be final tragedy tomorrow.

"Modern man's technological power will no longer allow him to make those grievous mistakes that past civilizations were free to indulge in — nor can he ignore the lessons of a past that other civilizations did not possess, Man's technical knowledge makes it possible for him to build heaven on earth or destroy his planet, and his historical knowledge makes it possible, for the first time, to avoid those deadly shoals on which every other civilization has destroyed itself."

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