

America — a dream gone sour

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SOMETIMES extreme dangers instead of elevating a nation, bring it low. This is what happened to America after 9/11. Two hundred years ago America was militarily weak and economically poor but to millions of people in other countries it was the hope of the world because of the timeless values it stood for.

Today it presents an alarming spectacle. The leaders of modern America seem vastly inferior to those who brought America into being. When America was engaged in the most just of struggles, that of a people escaping from another people's yoke, and when it was a question of creating a new nation in the world, outstanding men came forward to lead the country.

Three men more than any others, ended British colonial rule and helped bring the United States into being: George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The urge to separate from Great Britain was sweeping across the land "like a Torrent". The Congress created a Committee of Five, as it soon was called, to prepare a Declaration of Independence. Its members included Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York. Adams chaired the committee.

Seventeen days after its creation, the Committee of Five presented its draft to Congress. Two days later, on that steaming July 1, Congress took up the question of

humane civilization. Two hundred years ago, America caught the imagination of the world because of the ideals which it stood for. Today its example is tarnished with military adventurism and conflicts abroad. In the past, some envied America, some liked America, some hated America but almost all respected it. And all knew that without the United States peace and freedom would not have survived.

Today President Bush appears to believe in a kind of unilateral civilization. The United Nations is an afterthought; treaties are not considered binding. The war on terror is used to topple weak regimes. Today Washington's main message to the world seems to be, Take dictation. Today America does not chase out an occupier, but occupies; does not push back an invader, but invades; does not repulse an invader, but invades. No wonder, very few respect America these days. The poor and the weak are scared to death and fear the world's only superpower. In the eyes of millions of Muslims throughout the world, America is

war on two ancient civilizations that formed their identity by repelling invaders? Are they destined to fail once again to recognize the limitations of modern high-technology military equipment, in confronting unconventional, highly motivated Islamic nationalist movements? Are the Americans so naive as to believe that the war they are fighting is a war for democracy and freedom when most of their Islamic coalition partners are either military dictators or thoroughly corrupt, discredited civilians despots hated by their people?

The Americans claim to be better; they claim to be setting an example for others; they publicly divide the world along an axis of good and evil. And yet they deny even the most basic rights to those they deem their enemies, and fail so manifestly to honor their own professed convictions. Long before September 11 Secretary of State Madeline Albright, defending the use of cruise missiles against Iraq declared, "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable

nation. We stand tall. We see farther into the future". Hubris and hypocrisy are a deadly combination. Today Muslims, not connected with Osama bin Laden, consider the US to be on a moral par with Genghis Khan and genuinely believe that the war on terrorism is simply a euphemism for extending US control in the Islamic world and stealing Iraqi oil.

The photo of a naked, hooded, wired, Iraqi prisoner standing on a box after having being told he would be electrocuted if he stepped or fell off may well become the lasting emblem of this cruel, unjust war, much as the photo of a

Americans seem to have forgotten America as an idea, as a source of optimism and as a beacon of liberty. They have stopped talking about who they are and are only talking about who they are going to invade, oust or sanction. These days nobody would think of appealing to the United States for support for upholding a human rights

Independence. At day's end, Congress, sitting as a committee of the whole, voted 9 - 2 for Independence. South Carolina and Pennsylvania opposed the motion. New York abstained. Delaware's delegation was deadlocked. Congress deferred the official vote until the following morning. When Congress reconvened on July 2, it was immediately clear that two important changes had occurred. Two members of the Pennsylvania delegation who had opposed Independence on the previous day were absent. In addition, the deadlock with Delaware's delegation would be broken. A role call vote was taken. New York once again abstained, but every other colony — it was their final vote as colonies — voted for independence. A jubilant Adams predicted that henceforth July 2 would be commemorated annually, "as the Day of Deliverance".

The next day, and the day after, July 3 and 4 Congress debated the draft of the Declaration of Independence, trimmed it by about one — fourth, deleted unnecessary words and tinkered with cumbersome sentences. Jefferson was mortified and cried that his Chief Editors had "mangled the manuscript". Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on the evening of July 4. With that, it transformed His Majesty's colonies into a Sovereign, independent country.

Three persons, George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson — all conservative men — successful members of the colonial elite turned revolutionaries, set the world ablaze and changed the course of world history. The future sole superpower was born. Independent America, it was hoped, would become an "Asylum for mankind", and offer refuge to the world's oppressed. Like a shining beacon, America, it was hoped, would herald the, "birth day of a new world", the beginning of an epoch in which humankind across the earth could "begin the world over again".

From the beginning, America was more than a place. It represented the values and ideals of a

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perceived today as the greatest threat to the world of Islam since the 13th century.

Americans seem to have forgotten America as an idea, as a source of optimism and as a beacon of liberty. They have stopped talking about who they are and are only talking about who they are going to invade, oust or sanction. These days nobody would think of appealing to the United States for support for upholding a human rights case — may be to Canada, to Norway or to Sweden, but not to the United States. Before there were three faces of America in the world — the face of the Peace Corps, America that helps others, the face of multinationals and the face of US military power. The balance has gone wrong lately and the only face of America we see now is one of military power.

Not very long ago, how wonderful was the position of the New World where man had no enemies but himself and to be happy and to be free it was enough to will it to be so. Today American troops are scattered around the world from the plains of Northern Europe to the mountains of Afghanistan and the plains of Iraq in search of a phantom enemy, bombing and killing innocent Afghan and Iraqi men, women and children. Though it rejects imperial pretensions, it is for all its protestations, perceived in the world as peremptory, domineering and imperial. Its actions in Afghanistan and Iraq are perceived as part of an open-ended empire-building plan with geo-strategic goals. Under this plan, the United States would acquire a permanent military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq for projecting its power in central Asia, South Asia, Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

Are the Americans, once again, on the wrong side of history? Doesn't it reflect their profound ignorance of history, culture and politics of the Islamic world? Are the Americans destined to fail, once again, to recognize the futility of trying to wage a modern

naked, fleeing, napalmed little girl became the emblem of the Vietnam war.

"My greatest complaint", Tocqueville wrote almost two hundred years ago, "against democratic government, as organized in the United States, is not, as many Europeans make out, its weakness, but rather its irresistible strength. What I find most repulsive in America is not the extreme freedom reigning there but the shortage of guarantees against tyranny". Jefferson sounded a similar warning when he said: "The executive, in our government is not the sole, it is scarcely the principal, object of my jealousy. The tyranny of the legislature is the most formidable dread at present and will be for many years. That of the executive will come in its turn. But it will be at remote period". He who wrote these lines has proved profoundly prophetic. That time it appears, has come.

Today the most powerful democracy and upholder of liberty and rights of man is detaining hundreds of suspected Afghan and Iraqis in a legal black hole. The purpose is to put them beyond the rule of law. And only now has the US Supreme Court come to their rescue, ruling that it is illegal and that the detainees must be given the right to defend themselves in a court of law.

As America, mired in two cruel, unjust wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, approaches July 4, President Eisenhower's words in his 1961 farewell address once again demand attention and respect:

"In the councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exist and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defence with our peaceful method and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together."