

The Colonial Mindset

The continuing lack of accountability for Iraqi civilians killed since the invasion started shows not only the callousness of the US and UK but also a resurfacing of the colonial mindset. By Nazneen Ahmed

Historians have put forward various reasons for the European drive for Empire in the 18th and 19th century. Without doubt, strategic (intra-European competition) and economic interests, as well as local factors (interaction with local elites) played a role in the development of the colonizing force. But it is important to recognize the ideological component. Colonizing Europeans believed they were on a civilizing mission, and this belief was reinforced by the superior military technology and advanced administrative systems they brought to bear on local populations.

When the Age of Empire was at its height around the late 19th century, the European colonist in Asia and Africa was driven by mercenary motives and, if he cared for the 'natives' at all, by the sense of mission Joseph Conrad called "the white man's burden". A large part of the project centred on civilizing the brutes: on bringing order to the chaos, modern government to the benighted, education and technology to the unschooled, the one true God to the pagans, and prosperity to the indigent. This attitude was driven by the idea that Western civilization was the norm. Other civilizations were judged against this norm and—obviously—found wanting. Hence the missionary zeal and noble rhetoric of colonization.

By the end of the 20th century, after de-colonization, the wars of independence, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Civil Rights movement in the US, the social upheavals of the Sixties in the West, and the relativism of postmodernism, the world appeared to have set the white man's burden down as a bit of an odd thing.

But, with the invasion of Iraq, some white men have publicly taken up the burden again. The ghost of colonialism is up and about. And this time the cause is democracy and freedom. Though the strategic and economic reasons form a large part of the rationale for the new colonization, the ideological reason is the one presented to the world. The new American Empire, in popular perception, is intent on spreading freedom, as President Bush II and Prime Minister Blair never tire of telling us. In order to match the rhetoric with more mundane goals, they explain that freedom stops poor brown people from becoming resentful and vindictive of better-off Westerners. It's a clever narrative. It not only provides a self-defence rationale for continued military interventions, but also maintains the myth of inherent Western superiority. The myth also provides the moral argument for intervention, if one were needed. There's no public talk about the strategic or economic reasons. It's all about spreading freedom and fighting the "scourge of terror".

For US and UK policymakers, it is the strategic and economic benefits of neo-colonialization that are the objectives of the venture. Ordinary citizens are fed the ideological angle, and those who believe it essentially believe in the inherent nobility of the American cause (which is nothing but a self-proclaimed mission to lead the world). Otherwise how do you justify the death of 13,000 to 100,000 Iraqi civilians and the destruction of Iraqi society?

What's most deplorable about this narrative, however, is the cynical way politicians, policymakers, academics, and journalists are promoting the colonial mindset. Lacking any higher intellectual goal than promoting their class interests, they resort to a soulless and destructive idea. In a world that is plural and progressive, there is no place for a recidivist idea like colonialism.

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Another Perspective

Reporter: “Mr Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?”

Mahatma Gandhi: “I think it would be a very good idea.”

– *Attributed*

No Thought for the Colonized

There is no human failure greater than to launch a profoundly important endeavour and then leave it half done. This is what the West has done with its colonial system. It shook all the societies of the world loose from their old moorings. But it seems indifferent whether or not they reach safe harbour in the end.

– *Barbara Ward, The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations (1962)*

At the Point of a Gun

Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.

– *Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (1961)*

Loudly Idealistic

Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American...America is the only idealistic nation in the world.

– *Woodrow Wilson, speech on 8*

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September 1919.

Sermonize Me Not

There are far too many politicized people on earth today for any nation readily to accept the finality of America's historical mission to lead the world.

– *Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (1993)*