

Constructing a New Imperial Order? The War in Iraq and the Ideology of Clashism

Seifudein Adem*

Less than a month after terror attacks hit New York and Washington D. C. in September 2001, America launched a war in Afghanistan. The result was abetting and quick: the Taliban regime was dislodged from power in a little more than a month; *Al Qaeda*, the parent organization of the perpetrators of the attacks, was driven out of its caves and was walloped. A debate was then sparked as to what this portends for the future of world politics. Observers and analysts all agreed on the epochal significance of the chain of events. On its deeper meaning, however, they were deeply divided.¹ Some saw the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan as the beginning of the clash of civilizations while others perceived it as heralding the age of the New Imperialism; still for others it marked the beginning of the Third World War. It is useful to note here that many observers seemed sometimes to overlook that these scenarios are necessarily not mutually exclusive.² The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 appears, propitiously, to shed the much-needed light on these issues. The central argument of this paper is that the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 demonstrates the world has been plunged into a clash of civilizations driven by America's new imperial impulse—a historical impulse, which has maintained a clear link to the past.³ The paper focuses on political and academic discourse on the contemporary scene to explore how a new universe of discourse paralleling an emergent hegemonic order is being socially constructed.

Social constructivism, which goes by different names and multiple variants, is becoming one of the flagship concepts in interpretive human sciences. And yet, in spite of the popularity of the umbrella concept, few topics are as hotly and relentlessly debated as the scope and limits of the social constructivist paradigm. But some consensus also exists within and across the academic fault lines to the effect that the quintessential meaning of social construction falls outside the contested terrain. Put in ordinary language, the constructivist framework of analysis: 1) denies the existence and inevitability of social entities and relationships independent of our discursive practice; 2) usually throws doubt, sometimes explicitly and forcefully, on their desirability or their inherent goodness as they currently are; and as a consequence of this, 3) it advocates their abolition or transformation; and, finally, 4) it admits, if nothing is done, they would ossify making the consequences associated with them inevitable. Underlying all of the above propositions is the core assumption that actors' identities and interests are constituted, and are not given *a priori*. Social constructivism, thus defined, would guide and inform the discussion in this paper.

The Return of History: Episode One

The events of the opening years of the 21st century have ended the short life of the end of history thesis, endism for short, which grew in the ecstatic atmosphere of the unexpectedly sudden disappearance of an avowed enemy, the “evil empire” of communism. But Francis Fukuyama, the author of endism, does not seem to give up, as he tirelessly seeks to salvage his thesis in a bid to make it compatible with recent “historical” events. As a preface to what follows, it would therefore be appropriate to review the ill-fated hypothesis of the end of history in brief and point to a couple of serious contradictions in its latest formulation. The reasons why I wish first to engage endism include its meta-theoretical ambition and its sharply direct conflict

with the idea of the clash of civilizations, or clashism, another master narrative later discussed in this paper in greater detail.

In his famous book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama stated his central argument as follows: “[a]t the end of history, there are no *serious ideological competitors* left to liberal democracy.”⁴(Italics mine) More recently he restated the gist of his teleological position in these words: “...in the long run, it is hard to see that Islamism offers much of a realistic alternative as a governing ideology for real world societies.”⁵ I contend otherwise. But to argue that history has not ended in the way prophesied by him is not necessarily to suggest that Islamism represents a serious ideological competitor to liberal democracy. The reverse is also true—with the absence of a clear definition of what “serious ideological competitor” amounts to—it is by no means easy to vindicate the aforementioned central argument. With the excessive elasticity which Fukuyama’s formulation allows, one can argue neither communism nor fascism represented a serious competitor to liberal democracy. If so, it follows that it would be inaccurate to say we are at the end of history in the face of the Islamist challenges, as it would be inaccurate to say we have reached the end of history while many lived under fascist and communist rules.

Efforts to tailor endism in one masterstroke to fit the new times are visible in other forms too, such as in the shifted emphasis from *serious competition* to *dominance*. “We remain at the end of history because there is only one system that will continue to *dominate* world politics, that of the liberal democratic west,”⁶ wrote Fukuyama recently. The existential fact that the west continues to dominate is no truer now than it has been in the decades past. The exercise here is nothing short of red herring, changing attention to another subject that is not contentious at all. On the other hand, the very notion of domination implies the presence of the other to be

dominated, the other which may well be a competitor, serious or otherwise. And if the liberal democratic model has an inbuilt appeal arising from its superiority, then it is hard to see why it becomes necessary to continue to dominate. After all, at the end of history, it is postulated, people would realize that liberal democracy is a rational act that is superior to other forms of ideology.⁷ Another attempt to salvage endism and redeem it as a logically coherent meta-theory seem to have had only the effect of further cluttering it by introducing into it additional contradictions. Unmistakably muddling up the idea, this formulation admits and denies the end of history, both at the same time.⁸ In an apparent response to critics who pointed to the dissonance between the end of history thesis and the recent “historical” events, Fukuyama remarked:

Of course, *much of the world is indeed mired in history*, having neither economic growth nor stable democracy nor peace. But the end of the Cold War marked an important turn in international relations, since for the first time *the vast majority* of the world’s great powers were stable, prosperous liberal democracies. While there could be *skirmishes* between countries in history, like Iraq, and those beyond it, like the United States, *the prospect of great wars between great powers had suddenly diminished.*⁹ (Italics mine)

Let us critically, but briefly, interrogate what this excerpt says, for it does indeed say a lot about the state of the end of history thesis. To start with, one question which arises is this: if it was indeed true that “much of the world is mired in history”, how can the end of history have any meaning at all? A tentative answer can be found by looking at the past. I mean history does offer some clues as to the sense in which it can still be maintained that history has ended. Imperial discourse describes the time between 1815 and 1914 as the “hundred-years-peace”

period. At the same period there were numerous “encounters” between Europe and “the other” regions, “encounters” that had left hundreds of thousands of “natives” dead. Such historical encounters are of course erased from the pages of imperial discourse presumably because they did not involve two sides that are *sovereign* entities; the encounters were between sovereign European states, on the one hand, and other non-sovereign chiefdoms and principalities which have no equal legal standing in international law, on the other. If it was not right to excise in this way a bloody chapter in the history of international relations, then it would not be outright wrong to leave out “much of the world”, that is “mired in history.”

Similarly, one wonders what Fukuyama had in mind when he notes that there are now a vast majority of great powers which, with the end of the Cold war, [suddenly?] became stable, prosperous liberal democracies? A reader would be excused for not being unable to name these great powers that became stable, prosperous liberal democracies *after* 1989 that were not so *before* 1989. Also, take the March 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Could this “encounter” fairly be reduced to a *skirmish*, when the most powerful state on earth sends a quarter of a million of its soldiers, armed up to their teeth, to an area that is “mired in history.” As for the diminishing of the prospect of great wars between great powers, such an argument is hardly new; neither did this phenomenon become evident with the end of the Cold War. While the evidence is far from conclusive, democratic peace theorists had all along argued that democracies, which historically happen also to be prosperous, tend not to fight one another. In alluding to the long pedigree of the democratic peace theory, my intention was merely to put a question mark on the notion of *suddenness* in the diminishing of the prospect of great wars between great powers. Another aspect of this very assertion, however, equally suffers from inadequacies stemming from the discounting of the changed conception of the meaning of great

wars and great powers. Great wars are not merely those, which take place between great powers. If the “greatness” of a war is to be measured in terms of the greatness of the human and material damage it inflicts upon the warring parties, then such wars have not historically limited themselves to the physical confines of the so called great powers. Notwithstanding this fact, mainstream discourse has by and large removed such themes from its purview in order perhaps to sanitize the discipline.

On the other hand, the “great power” theory is based on an anachronistic idea, which is no longer valid; it is the idea that great, prosperous economic powers would be at the same time great military powers and vice versa. Such an idea is confuted empirically by the facts in countries like North Korea, which is a formidable military power without being a great economic power in any sense, or Japan, which is a great economic power without being a great military power. That there are not many North Koreas today is here beside the point. Would a full-fledged war between country X, which is a great economic/military power, and country Y, which is economically underdeveloped but possesses massively destructive weapons be regarded as a great war? The answer, of course, is negative in Fukuyama’s formulation, but not in mine. Political definitions of concepts like great power and great wars might have had some validity in the past. But the proliferation of modern weapons and ideas has now rendered them largely useless. It is therefore fair to say that Fukuyama’s master narrative perhaps fell not least because of the weight of the burden of its imperial conceptual baggage. If so, in a sense endism would represent a classic case of the victor becoming the victim of history. Another formulation of the end of history thesis defers *the return of history* without denying that it might well do. “[At the moment], [t]here are certainly no new non-democratic great power to challenge the United States; China may one day qualify, but it isn’t there yet.”¹⁰ In short, the end of history, with its

too many “severe anomalies”, has failed to account for the changes that have taken place over the last several years. With a sense intended not to disparage Fukuyama’s immense contribution to the debate in this and other areas, perhaps it would not be premature therefore to pronounce *the end of history* is finally dead.

Clashism and the War in Iraq

In spite of the storm of debate and discussion it ignited when it was first launched, fairly quickly Samuel Huntington’s idea of the Clash of Civilizations was left largely discredited as an empty theory. But this was all to change after that fateful date of September 2001. Very few analysts were able to foresee that even a faulty social theory could change the course of history.¹¹ As it turned out, dynamics of events would transform the very defects of the theory into a powerful weapon for recruiting followers, most significantly from the ranks of those whose actions and inactions would be consequential. Following the terror attacks, the recurrent theme in Western political discourse became the preservation of a “civilization.”

In 1993 Samuel Huntington stated the major tenet of his idea of the clash of civilizations as follows: “The fundamental source of conflict in the new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.”¹² The proselytizing attractions of clashism, to those attracted to it, lay mainly in its simplicity. It is a simple, bifurcated idea of “us” versus “them.” It is about a “superior” us and “inferior” others. It is about “civilizations” that are clearly divided, never crisscrossing, overlapping or intermingling with one another. And it is about a clash whose final outcome is a foregone conclusion. Such a plainly defined enemy naturally requires strategic redefinition as well. For instance, the principle of preemptive war would be privileged with the ultimate purpose of waging a war so as to be in a better position in which to wage another war. In the new imperial

world order of the clash of civilizations, the UN becomes an irrelevant system, primarily because it is itself a conglomeration of different civilizations.

Simplicity of clashism was not the only factor, which gave a new lease of life to a discourse, which had been largely rejected by many. There were other factors too. First, there was the demise of the short-lived rival hypothesis: the end of history. Despite unity of purpose, endism and clashism are contradictory and conflicting in their conclusions. There is no way both contradictory hypotheses could have proved true *at the same time*. Here the measure of truth is not necessarily the correspondence of the theories to objective reality. On this score, both hypotheses fail miserably. The measure of truth of reflexive social theories such as the above two is the degree of their (self-) fulfillment. With the last nail put on the coffins endism in September 2001, it seemed therefore the clash of civilizations idea was vindicated. Second, a neo-Machiavellian administration that was committed to a clashist ideology, at least tacitly, and was prepared to sell and implement the idea was needed—a requisite met with the installment of the administration of George W. Bush and the militarization of American foreign policy in the years 2000 and 2001 respectively. A hawkish administration that was unconcerned and unabashed about mixing religion and politics was a god-sent agency for the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilizations. In short, at the turn of the century there was in place an administration, which seemed to subscribe to the clashist political imaginary with a deep sense of inner response to a degree perhaps even not foreseen by Huntington himself.

It is seldom recognized as such, but in reality the American media exercises unfettered power in the construction of meaning through manipulation of symbols. A sycophantic media of significance was also needed—and it was there on the spot—to project and legitimize the ideas articulated by government officials and policy intellectuals. A gullible public could be easily

made to believe an idea that is presented and represented in black and white, especially when alternative views are suppressed or distorted. In a little while I shall elaborate more fully how the simplicity of clashism, the neoconservative political agenda and the sinful media provided the complete recipe for the clash of civilizations in the context of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

After the September terror attacks, there had been, as indicated above, a good deal of discussion about the broader implications of the US war in Afghanistan. With the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, it now appears that the war in Afghanistan was just a precursor to the new imperialism, which operates within the framework of a clashist ideology. These acts as well as the discourses mobilized for the purposes of legitimating them clearly reminisce the European imperialism of the 19th century. Of course many things have changed since then. But many other things have also remained the same. Some of the major themes, which resurfaced following the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq have used the barbarian/civilized dichotomy as their point of reference, which indicates that beneath the veneer of the discourse on liberation and disarmament was something akin to an imperial urge. Let us begin with the *casus belli* of the war itself. The pretext for the invasion changed from time to time, from disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to the liberation of Iraqi people from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Depending on the prevailing mood of the time and the audience, the emphasis fluctuated, sometimes with both reasoning simultaneously employed. As the war approached, however, more and more emphasis was placed, in effect, on the need for an imperial tutoring of the Iraqi people on self-governance after removing the regime of Saddam Hussein. On the surface, there was no question these were worthy goals. But

the picture changes when we remind ourselves of the enduring traits of imperialism. As Edward Said observed in his *Culture and Imperialism*:

...the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting. Yet it is a rhetoric whose most damning characteristic is that it has been used before, not just once (by Spain and Portugal) but with deafeningly repetitive frequency in the modern period, by the British, the French, the Belgians, the Japanese, the Russians and now the Americans.¹³

The bone of contention between the international community and Saddam Hussein had solely centered on disarmament issues. Hence, the UN Security Council was not prepared to endorse the Anglo-American war plans because there were clear signs that disarmament through inspection, or more accurately, verification of whether Iraq possessed WMD, was working. Furthermore, the Charter of the UN unequivocally forbids any notion of one regime changing another by force. The Secretary General of the UN was therefore unequivocal in his position that such a war would have no international legitimacy.¹⁴

On the other hand, the Bush administration rebuffed Saddam's "cooperative" gestures and insisted that if the UN did not endorse the invasion thereby legitimizing the war, the organization would become irrelevant. The President had long ordained that Saddam shall be ousted regardless of what the latter does or does not do. Given the financial leverage the US has as the largest contributor to the UN system, it was beyond a shadow of doubt that the US *could* indeed render the organization ineffective and irrelevant. Despite such a real threat, however, the UN tenaciously held into its position and declined to lend legitimacy to the impending war. The US and the UK were however unimpressed; they launched their invasion on 20 March 2003. What the Bush administration failed to see, or chose to ignore, in regard to the UN was the other

side of the equation. No doubt the UN's principled stand has cost it the good-will of the current US administration; but had the organization succumbed into the Anglo-American pressure to legitimize a clearly illegitimate war, the UN would have become irrelevant all the same in the eyes of the vast majority of the UN-member nations and the international public opinion at large. The organization has thus saved or even enforced its moral authority.

In spite of the taste of bitter diplomatic defeat at the UN, the US administration is unlikely to genuinely wish to make the UN an irrelevant organization. For one thing, the UN would be allowed to carry on with its role in non-political/non-military areas such as humanitarian provisions and other issues defined as uncontroversial by the U.S. These are the tasks—paralleling what Kwame Nkrumah had once said about the function assigned to Africa in the international division of labor as the hewer of woods and drawer of waters—that the U.S. feels are best handled by the UN. On the other hand, the UN is likely to be seen as largely irrelevant in the eyes of the current American administration when it comes to a course of actions, which the latter wishes to undertake in relation to recalcitrant states or nonstate groups in the Southern hemisphere. But in other geographic areas, the administration would pursue a multilateralist route—that is, selective multilateralism, where international rules and norms would be followed on a case-by-case basis. This is also in keeping with contemporary orthodoxy, which divides the world into two, be it the civilized and the barbarian or the west and the rest or post-historical and the historical and others. Such a dualist approach as well permits duality in codes of conduct in dealing with different parts of the world, which are at different stages of “modernity.”

As indicated above, at last the removal of the Iraqi regime and the “liberation” of the Iraq people became the declared goal of the U.S.-UK invasion, and in spite of its having not received

any whit of legitimacy from the UN Security Council, “the coalition” felt comfortable with going it alone. And this further underscored that the U.S. administration was genuinely committed to its imperial project in which “the relations of power, and consequently the wishes of the stronger, are the givens of the debate, not the issues to be contested.”¹⁵ As if such blatant violation of international law were not enough, the administration even requested some of its allies to expel Iraqi diplomats and close down their embassies. The request was generally rejected. Japan, one of the staunchest supporters of the invasion, went in a rare move as far as saying that such a request amounts to interference in its internal affairs.¹⁶

As the war progressed, all indications were that the U.S. administration was unconcerned if its actions and the reaction of others would lead to the clash of civilizations such as predicted by Samuel Huntington. It was reported soon after the war began that a Tomahawk missile went astray and hit a town in Iran despite the soothing rhetoric about the precision of American missiles and bombs. First, what does this say about the precision of the precision argument? How come a satellite-guided weapons system which was said to have a capacity to hit within 15 ft. radius of the target went as far as Iran, if it had indeed? One possibility is that the missile system is not as precise as it was said to be. If so, this would reinforce the suspicion that the rhetoric of the precision of America’s weapons as well as the much discussed and much anticipated torching of Baghdad by a massive “shock and awe” bombardment, which was televised live, was merely an expensive arms expo of the US military-industrial complex. If the weapon system was indeed as precise as portrayed to be, the question which arises is whether there was a deliberate human intervention in the misfiring of the missile in order to entice Iran, another member of what George Bush had labeled “the Axis of Evil”, the popular analogue of “the Islamic-Confucian Alliance” in Huntington’s formulation, into the clash of civilizations trap. One wonders why the

U.S. missile had not fallen “by mistake” in the Israeli territory, a theoretical possibility given the geographical proximity. Such developments should also be seen in the context of the series of warning to Syria, a warning, which was preceded by another “mistaken” bombing of Syrians in a civilian vehicle that was traveling in the border region.

As the war ensued, a multitude of Iraqi civilians were killed, even as the US military in concert with the media continued its discourse about the precision of America’s weapons and how deep they could penetrate suggesting, in effect, the truism of what Antoine Rivarol had said long ago: civilized people could be as near to barbarism as the most polished steel is to rust.¹⁷ By the time of writing nearly 3000 Iraqi civilians were reported to have been killed in the course of the Anglo-American invasion.¹⁸ As if this were not enough, Mr. Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, had even threatened to use the Mother of All Bombs, a 21000 ton explosive ordinance. It may be said in passing that one wonders why such a devastating instrument of war would not be categorized as WMD. It seems the definition of WMD is based not just on the “mass-destructiveness” of the weapon itself; it is a political definition which is based also on who possesses/uses it.

Since President George W. Bush coined “the Axis of Evil” in 2001 in reference to Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the media has picked it up and used it with repetition, which seems to reflect a tacit approval of the idea, and without seriously addressing the question-begging assumption about the correspondence of the concocted idea to the realities on the ground. How “evil” is the evil in the “Axis of Evil”? However “evil” is defined by those who have given themselves to define others in these term, does application of the same definitional yardstick limit the “evilness” to the three states identified by the President? And what do these countries have in common with one another, what does Iraq have in common with Iran and each of these

countries with North Korea? By forfeiting its right and duty to ask these simple but fundamental questions, the media raised the status of the empty concept to the status of a self-evident truth suggesting that “the Axis of Evil” was something which is out there for all to see. Indeed with the removal of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the media have reached a point where it can even dispense with the need to attribute the phrase to the President as was the case earlier. Nowadays it is commonplace therefore to hear such news stories as “The U.S. Administration has warned Iran, another member of the Axis of Evil,” with the existential certitude which one exhibits, for instance, when referring to NATO. The media has been also engaged in a systematic attempt to represent “the Axis of Evil” idea as if it were something that was revealed to President Bush. But the truth of the matter is that the President appropriated the notion of “the Axis of Evil” from Samuel Huntington, who in his controversial 1993 article, declared that “...the Confucian-Islamic Alliance has come into being...”¹⁹ and offered his Machiavellian advice as to how to crush it. In short, rather than discharging its duty as the chief democratic instrument of freedom, the media became part and parcel of an imperial enslavement project.

In the course of the war in Iraq, polls after polls administered by the major media networks declared after the invaders plunged deep into the Iraqi territory that the majority of Americans were in support of the war. The poll results were, however, suspect since the measure lacked content validity, as it lumps, perhaps not inadvertently, support for the war together with support for the troops. In other words, the poll results were pre-determined by value and politics, and not objective epistemology. The media’s complicity in what Ali Mazrui has called the three sins of the press in the age of hegemonic globalization were evident: the sin of commission in which the media distorts reality through manipulative reportage; the sin of omission in which the media presents a one-sided reality with the other side all together omitted; and the sin of

submission in which the media succumbs into the dictates of politicians rather than the dictates of truth.²⁰ The cruelty and totalitarian nature of Saddam's regime was recited in the media time and again. But one heard rarely, if at all, the role the U.S. had played in the consolidation of Saddam's repressive machine. In the course of the invasion, the extent of civilian casualties is glossed over, or totally "erased" from the reportage even as some non-Western sources kept reporting this part of the picture as well. At best, the gross civilian casualties appeared as footnotes in America's mainstream media only as "collateral damages". But the truth remains that the Iraqi civilian death cannot reasonably be glossed over as collateral damage of a war directed against the regime of Saddam Hussein or his imaginary WMDs any more than the lives of those who died on 11 September 2001 can be dismissed as a collateral damage of terrorist attacks directed against the symbolic Twin Towers.

The main sin of the media in relation to civilian casualties, not to mention the disruption of their lives, is omission. Of course, such omission is partly due to logistical problems, but the media could have at least relayed even "unconfirmed reports" as is customary under such circumstances. The unstated reasoning involved, then, may well be that the savage life is expendable and not worthy of even a mention. Another example of the uncanny role of the media in the course of the war related to the discourse on occupation. There were divergent views in the military and political circles in Washington as to how long the US may have to occupy Iraq after the removal of Saddam's regime. These officials were not even reminded of the plain contradiction when these same people endlessly declare through the same media that the US is a liberating force, it is not an occupying force, a grim reminder of those Orwellian lines: War is Peace; Ignorance is Knowledge. In the process it was not hard to see how the Pentagon transformed itself into the Orwellian Ministry of Love and the CNN into the Ministry of Truth of

George Orwell's *1984*. In the course of the Anglo-American war in Iraq a new notion of embedded journalism was also introduced. The idea of embedded journalism is predicated on the premise that the embed shall not see whatever he/she wishes to see because of the restricted freedom of movement. It is also part of the *modus operandi* of the new journalism that the embed shall not report even every thing he/she happens to see without the approval of the commanding officer. In short, political/security expediency rather than the dictates of truth would shape what the audience would be treated to. In the very "live" reportage of the war, therefore, the media was engaged in a process of concealment. Perhaps it was observations such as these which prompted a contemporary critic to scornfully call the embeds, or the new breed of journalists, *presstitutes*.²¹ The obscurantist media was thus central in mobilizing the clashist discourse, insulating the hegemony of such discourse from serious scrutiny and corrupting public opinion to create a regime of truth. In short these are the contours of how policy intellectuals, neoconservative ideologues and the media colluded to re-make the world in the mirror image of the clashist teachings.

The Return of History: Episode Two

"The power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming or emerging," wrote Edward Said, "is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them."²² In the run up to the Anglo-American expedition in Iraq, a whole range of narratives was used to legitimize the hugely unpopular war. As a part of this, political elites in Washington and London drew analogy between Saddam Hussein and Benito Mussolini. They argued that if Mussolini had been made to pay the price when he invaded Abyssinia in 1935, millions of lives could have been saved in subsequent years and that the international community should not repeat the same mistake in relation to Saddam Hussein. Even with all the

traits that Saddam shares with Mussolini, the actual and prospective behavior of the former in 2003 was—anything but—like Mussolini’s. Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, not his actions and inactions in 2003, shared some similarity with Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. Appropriately a genuine multi-national coalition, and not just “the coalition of the willing”, was then quickly put together to dislodge Saddam’s forces out of Kuwait in 1991.

On the other hand, if it were not for the willful amnesia of the powerful, what happened in 1868 Abyssinia under King Theodore, not the Abyssinia of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1935, would have offered more lessons by way of historical analogy. But rather than vindicating the Americans and the British, the analogy would have exposed the machinations of these powers. Let me elaborate. One of the first groups of “the coalition” forces to cross the Iraqi territory in March 2003 was a certain U.S. *expeditionary* unit. The very term of expeditionary unit conjures up the imagery of 19th century imperialism and other parallels from that period. The term is a left-over from the 19th century imperial discourse as it referred to a military campaign, or a mission sent to silence recalcitrant “chiefs” and “natives”. One such instance was the Abyssinian Expedition of 1868 under Sir Robert Napier. I use the Abyssinian Expedition to corroborate my point not because that particular expedition provides the most glaring example; it is because, as I noted above, Abyssinia was referred to by the U.S. and the UK officials in a bid to mobilize international support for their planned invasion. The Napier Expedition, as it was also called, went to Abyssinia, the only independent state in black Africa at the time, because its leader, King Theodore, challenged in his own way the supremacy of Britain in the region. The immediate goal of the expedition was the “liberation” of a few Europeans who had been imprisoned by the defiant king after, of course, removing the “regime” of Theodore. But the ultimate source of hostility between the British and the Abyssinian king was the condescending reaction to the

latter's request for British military assistance. Who knows the British perhaps read the request as a statement of intent for manufacturing a 19th century version of WMD. In any case the British reaction was snobbish and this apparently angered the King, prompting him to say, "if they [the British] wish to come and fight, let them come, and call me a woman if I don't beat them."²³ And come they did with a clear purpose of removing him and 'liberating' the prisoners.

Even to the astonishment of his adversary, the king put up a good fight, "but with such troops as he had, who in opposition to the English were virtually unarmed...the most heroic courage could do nothing..."²⁴ The British had 12000 well-equipped fighting men as opposed to 3000 men of King Theodore.²⁵ Maqdala, the fortress capital of the king fell and was then torched in the month of April 1868. The Abyssinian forces were decimated but the king, rather than surrendering, committed suicide after realizing that the Napier expedition had prevailed. Finally the victors went home with freed European prisoners as well as priceless Abyssinian treasures, which are housed in a museum in England to this date.

There are suggestive parallels between Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the Napier Expedition of March 1868. The numerical asymmetry between the U.S. and Iraqi forces, just like that of Napier and Theodore, was roughly in the ratio of 3 to 1. Although the Iraqi regular forces did not put up much of a good fight, where they did, they displayed gallantry in the face of American juggernaut, just like the Abyssinians did in 1868. The U.S. media and the military, of course, liked to call the Iraqi actions "pockets" of resistance, a referent aimed not merely at describing the "small size" of the resistance but was also meant to convey a contemptuous attitude towards it. Perhaps most significant parallel between the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the Abyssinian Expedition was the robbery, which the respective historical symbols of the Iraqis and the Abyssinians were subjected to. The countenance of the U.S. forces

in the second week of April 2003, if not their explicit encouragement of the looting of the Iraqi museum, may well symbolize the first shot of the war of civilizations. True, from the outset the Americans were straight forward in declaring that they would not target places of worship. But, symbolically, looting a national museum, or giving a green light for others to do so by leaving it without protection, was morally as wicked as targeting mosques. After all, it was reported that, one of the items looted from the Iraqi Museum included an original Koran, the Islamic Holy Book. In effect, therefore, a museum with such a historical relic subsumes what a mosque stands for as well, and much more.

In keeping with the old imperial tradition, one of the first things the US forces did after they “liberated” the Southern Iraqi port of Um Qasr was to raise the American flag, an act which was repeated in Baghdad several weeks later.²⁶ It must be noted, however, that the flag was quickly lowered reportedly because doing so was not appropriate. In the eyes of the invaders it was perhaps more of an embarrassment than inappropriateness—after all nothing is inappropriate for an occupying force to raise a flag of its own in a country it has “liberated”. In the age of the new colonial empire, it seems to matter less, if at all, whether or not that country was hitherto independent.

Not long after the U.S. “expeditionary” units advanced across the Iraqi territory, a few soldiers were captured by the Iraqi forces. Thereafter President George W. Bush was quick to tell the Americans, in effect, that the Iraqis are the new barbarians: “the US is facing forces that have no respect for conventions of war or rules of morality.”²⁷ Days after these remarks, Bush seemed even less inclined to use a veiled language such as his earlier phraseology suggested. Instead, this time he directly lectured about the “barbaric nature” of the Iraqi regime.²⁸ The British Minister of Defense was also forthcoming in calling the Iraqi side “barbarians”.²⁹ The

discourse of “civilized warfare”, “barbaric warfare” and the “civilizing mission”—as a demonstration of the process by which imperial powers separate themselves from “the other” while at the same time providing justification for their acts— all have of course a historical precedent and represent continuity in the vocabulary of empire builders.³⁰ It is useful also to note that aspects of the debate about America’s new empire building project echoed the discussion in Britain in 1870s on whether or not the project would prove to be prohibitively costly. Internal critics of British imperialism sometimes questioned the wisdom of colonizing impoverished, distant lands and spending resources to keep them under control.³¹ Similarly, more than 140 years later the same question have been raised in America about the cost of “reconstructing” Iraq in response to which the modern empire builders had only to draw attention to the fact that Iraq has oil. On the other hand, what concerned American sociologist F. A. Giddings at the turn of the 20th century was the compatibility of democracy and empire. He argued:

My studies of theoretical sociology long ago led me to believe that the combination of small states into larger political aggregates must continue until the entire semi-civilized, barbarian, and savage communities of the world are brought under the protection of the larger civilized nations.³²

After describing the British Empire as a model of “democratic empire”—that is, a blending of democracy at home and empire abroad, Giddings insisted on the need to pursue the project. In plain language, what the sociologist was saying was that the nature of “the semi-civilized, barbarian and savage” morally justifies the pillaging of their resources in the name of protecting them. Today it is the material cost of “democratic empire”, rather than the compatibility of democracy and empire, which has been heard loudly and clearly. Of course, the debate about the feasibility of a “democratic empire” would not be possible without a prior

definite answer about the compatibility of democracy and empire. Whether we assume, as logic dictates, or not that the current administration is convinced that the notion of democracy at home and empire abroad is compatible, the corrosive effects which empire-building projects carry for democracy at home are already obvious and need no detailed description. The builders of the new imperial order could not escape these effects unlike their 19th century imperial counterparts.

The invocation of international law by the U.S. administration during the invasion of Iraq also raises some critically important issues as well. Repeated reference was made by the administration to the 1948 Geneva Conventions on armed conflicts in the context of the treatment of the POWs. One logical question, which arises is how one could justifiably invoke a law of warfare if the very war itself is against international law. The Iraqi forces would rather treat the US-UK POWs in compliance to the Geneva Convention and especially refrain from showing them on TVs, warned the “coalition of the willing”, even as Iraqi forces were being shown on the U.S. media. But the issue here is not limited only to the hypocritical adherence to a portion of international law, while rejecting the source of it all. Even a far serious issue pertains to the tendency of implying different standards of applicability of the same portion of legal norms. Only several months before the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. rejected the applicability of the Geneva Convention to the prisoners of its war on terrorism in Afghanistan, despite the international appeal otherwise. And in Iraq, after it was confirmed that the Iraqis did in fact capture some American soldiers, the provisions of the Geneva Convention suddenly became all the more important. This again seems to be in line with the binarism of the barbarian and the civilized, according to which the latter could take the law into its hands, while the former should be held accountable for violation of the law, implying that the propriety of an action depends on the identity of its subjects, and that the U.S. identity would absolve it from the burden of

accountability irrespective of what it does or does not do. The whole process further exposed the emptiness of the rhetoric of America's ethical versatility thereby seriously undermining its claim of moral authority.

Some would of course argue that what we learn from the seeming hypocrisy discussed above is simply that the logic of consequence sometimes overrides the logic of appropriateness in international relations and that in the international system, unlike in domestic polity, the logic of appropriateness is not always, perhaps most of the time, compatible with the logic of consequence.³³ Again, this only illustrates how a predominant discourse legitimates a behavior which would otherwise be illegitimate, by encoding unacceptable conducts as necessary evil in order to absolve the great power by providing a justificatory trope. But insisting on being the supreme judge of one's own cause has been historically a defining feature of imperialism, however varied the label may be. If the international system was truly the culprit, one would expect small and weak states to behave similarly in a defiant way at least against those relatively weaker than themselves. But this is not generally the case. The reasoning involved may well lie in the recognition of the fact that it is only "the vices of the powerful [which] acquire some of the prestige of power."³⁴ But it is a vice none the less.

Conclusion

The dawn of the 21st century has been greeted with a poisoned international political climate generating suspicion among the followers of the world's major religions. In the face of this, it defies common sense and serious explanation to see a western Christian power waging unnecessary, illegitimate and internationally unpopular war against a Muslim state. It was understandable that the swift American victory in the war in Afghanistan did whet the imperial appetite of the sole superpower. In world politics there are not a whole lot of things, which lend

themselves to accurate prediction. And yet one thing that can be said with a lot of confidence, but with a deep concern, is that the adverse consequences of the bellicose international policies initiated by the current American administration would outlive the administration itself. Viewed in this light, the war in Iraq was therefore venturesome. Rather than allaying the suspicion that the US administration may be playing into the tunes of clashist ideology, the series of decisions sanctioned by the current administration in the course of the war seemed almost to confirm it, indicating unwillingness and/or inability on the part of America's decision-makers to seeing the world as it was, or as many saw it was.

Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations idea prognosticates certain things that would, and yes should, happen for his theory to be proved. By consequence and by design, the events surrounding the war in Iraq lead one to suspect that the U.S. administration's political compass is wrought with a clashist ideology. The administration, of course, denies that its goal is to engineer a clash of civilizations. Asked in April 2003 if the war in Iraq was a form of a clash of civilizations, President George Bush shrugged off the questions saying: "...when it comes to human needs and rights, there is no clash of civilizations."³⁵

What such whitewashing underscores is that the power to dominate is based also upon the power to define, to borrow a phrase from Jean-Paul Sartre, the essence of being and nothingness. In fact, such a power is a requisite for maintaining and enhancing the capacity to reproduce the relationship of dominance—in other words, it is a power, which is instrument of power. Social constructivism postulates that a knowledge claim can be based not only on the correspondence of that knowledge to the "real" world but also on the instrumentality of the claim for achieving specific goals. If action does indeed speak louder than words and if the true meaning of a term is likewise to be found by observing what someone does with it, not what he/she says about it, then

the instrumentality of knowledge claim is more convincing than the theory of its correspondence to truth in the case of the aforementioned official utterance.

* Visiting Professor, Graduate School of Area Studies, University of Tsukuba, Japan, Email adem@social.tsukuba.ac.jp , Phone: +81 298 536773, Fax : +81 298 300811

Notes

¹ For a preliminary perspective on the debate see, Walter LaFeber, "The Post September 11 Debate over Empire, Globalization, and Fragmentation," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 117, no. 1, (2002), pp.1-17.

² One of the few exceptions in this regard is the Oxford historian and neo-imperialist (that is what he called himself) Niall Ferguson, who suggests the compatibility between the new imperialism and the clash of civilizations. See his, "The Empire Slinks Back," *The New York Times Magazine*, 27 April 2003. Ali A. Mazrui also sees no conceptual incompatibility between imperialism and clashism. He argues that imperialism was just one phase of the clash of civilizations and that it was plaid out in the 19th century. The suggestion here, it seems, is that clashism is a re-emergence of imperialism in a different guise. See his, "The Truth between Tyranny and Terror: The United States, Israel and Hegemonic Globalization," Keynote Address at the 5th Conference of the International Center for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies, Eastern Mediterranean University, Cyprus, 25-27 April, 2002, p. 3. For a detailed analysis of Mazrui's position on this see, Seifudein Adem, *Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained: The Worldview of Ali A. Mazrui* (Provo, Utah: Global Humanities Press, 2002), especially, pp. 40-43.

³ For a useful genealogical study of the continuity in imperial discourse see, for instance, Mark Salter, *Barbarian and Civilization in International Relations* (London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002).

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 211.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "Has History Restarted Since September 11?," The Nineteenth Annual John Bonython Lecture, Melbourne, Australia, 8 August 2002, available at: <http://www.Cis.porg.au/Events/JBL/JBL02.htm>.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, "The West has Won," *The Guardian*, 11 October 2001, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/waronterror/story/0,1361,567333,00.html>, p. 3

⁷ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, pp. 211-212.

⁸ Fukuyama almost admitted that what happened on 11 September 2001 was a serious challenge to his hypothesis, saying that the event would seem, prima facie, to qualify as a historical event, suggesting a historical event at the end of history. Francis Fukuyama, "Has History Restarted Since September 11?"

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, "Has History Restarted Since September 11?"

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "Has History Restarted Since September 11?"

¹¹ One example of the few exceptions is a light-hearted verse by Frederick Tipson, "Culture-clashification: A Verse to Huntington's Curse," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, No. 2, (March/April 1997), pp. 166-9. I have also addressed this issue in some detail in my, "Social Theory and Public Policy," *The Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, No. 1, 2002, pp. 46-63.

¹² Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, (1993), p. 49.

¹³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. xvii.

-
- ¹⁴ After the war started, the helpless General Secretary would say that “we want to see this war coming to an end as soon as possible.” Reported on *CNN*, 27 March 2003.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Steven Forde, “Classical Realism” in Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, eds., *Traditions of International Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 71.
- ¹⁶ *The Japan Times*, 27 March 2003.
- ¹⁷ Vivien Foster, *Pearls of Wisdom*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p.61.
- ¹⁸ <http://www.iraqbodycount.net> (12 April 2003).
- ¹⁹ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” p. 47.
- ²⁰ Mazrui, “The Truth between Tyranny and Terror,” p. 2.
- ²¹ See “On Pimps and Prostitutes,” by Ilana Mercer at http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=32079 (May 23, 2003). The coinage of the term is attributed to Uri Avnery.
- ²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xiii.
- ²³ C. R. Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London: Macmillan, 1869), p. 291.
- ²⁴ Markham, p. 314.
- ²⁵ Markham, p. 204.
- ²⁶ The US flag raising “ceremony” in Baghdad was carried live on CNN, April 9, 2003.
- ²⁷ President George W. Bush’s Radio Address, 22 March 2003.
- ²⁸ President Bush’s Press Conference carried on CNN live, on 27 March 2003.
- ²⁹ A British Defense Department news conference carried on CNN, 24 March 2003.
- ³⁰ A good discussion of this is found in Salter, *Barbarian and Civilization in International Relations*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.
- ³¹ For a representative sample of the debates in Britain at the end of the 19th century is found in Peter Cain, *Empire and Imperialism: The Debate of the 1870s* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999). In relation to Iraq see, for instance, a brief comment: “The Burden of Empire,” *Asahi Shimbun/ International Herald Tribune*, 29 May 2003, p. 6.
- ³² F. A. Giddings, *Democracy and Empire* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), pp. v., 3.
- ³³ For a theoretical discussion of the relationship between the two types of logic, see J. G. March and J. P. Olsen, “The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders,” *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 1, (1998), pp. 943-969.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Ali A. Mazrui, “Black Experience and the American Empire: Between Globalization and Counter-Terrorism,” Draft Paper of Inaugural Lecture given at the launching of the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 8 February 2003, p. 13.
- ³⁵ *CNN International*, 4 April 2003.