

The Fall of Modernity

Has the American narrative authored its own undoing?

By Michael Vlahos

WE ARE LOSING OUR WARS in the Muslim world because our vision of history is at odds with reality. This is a well-established condition of successful societies, a condition that inevitably grows more worrisome with time and continuing success. In fact, what empires have most in common is how their sacred narratives come to rule their strategic behavior—and rule it badly. In America's case, our war narrative works against us to promote our deepest fear: the end of modernity.

A nation's evolving storyline gives concrete form to an accumulation of success and translates this into an assurance of transcendence. Those that claim to be the grandest societies in their own world inevitably style themselves as empires, not simply as large kingship domains exalted by good fortune but as regnant successors to a universal ideal. Thus the Ottoman vision as successor to the Roman Empire of Justinian, and of the contemporary Hapsburgs as the true heirs of the Western Roman Empire. Thus also Louis XIV, so too the Czars, as sons of Byzantium. This self-styling grows into a collective conviction that the once-national, now-imperial, soon-to-be-universal narrative is not only an inevitable story but is actually coterminous with history itself.

Later, when threats seem to come out of nowhere, society is surprised, affronted, and deeply apprehensive because the presence of such threats symbolically suggests that the narrative might be false. All threats are then mortal threats—not because they put at

risk the viability of the society itself but because they threaten the sacred symbolism of history that has become inseparable from national identity. They are a chilling announcement that the story is about to meet a bad end, or worse—be replaced by someone else's story.

Empires in their later stages therefore see threats not only as physical but also as symbolic, and the symbolic threat is always the more important, for it represents existential value—identity itself—and requires a necessarily existential response. It is not simply the actual threat that must be countered: the experience of meeting the threat must reclaim the divine certainty of the imperial narrative for all to see.

When such attacks come, they come for a reason. Their very existence reveals that the imperial-sacred narrative has become a war objective in its own right. Indeed, because the narrative has become enshrined as a sort of national tabernacle, successfully attacking it can reap as many rewards for an enemy in terms of authority as any material gains.

The imperial narrative of the grand nation thus becomes its double-edged sword. In day-to-day politics, its celebration reminds the people of their strength and unity. Even more important for external imperial relations, narrative becomes the badge of legitimacy as lead nation.

But the imperial narrative also makes the grand nation vulnerable to symbolic attack, a weak strategic position because the empire must maintain not only its material interests but also the

perfect integrity of the tabernacle—and as a symbolic edifice, the imperial narrative is brittle and relatively easy to attack. Moreover, if it is attacked successfully, regaining lost authority requires disproportionate effort so great as to risk being self-defeating. Even empires that are truly decadent and surely should know better—for whom even the smallest shock might unleash an historical avalanche—have put defense of the narrative above reality. Both Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans did just that in 1914.

Empires that come to identify themselves with the universal, whose stories are indistinguishable from grandeur and the hopes of humankind, cannot separate from sacred story without destroying themselves. So, even weak and failed, they must fight as if they were still grand. What choice do they have?

The United States, in contrast to Austria-Hungary or the Ottomans, still cherishes the freshness of its claim as the world's young hope. Indeed, in 2001, we were not simply the world nation: we were the "hyperpower."

Thus the 9/11 attacks were a frontal assault on the American narrative. They were instinctively compared to Pearl Harbor, but we were not the same innocent nation in 2001 that we were in 1941, seemingly minding our own business. In the intervening 60 years, we had built a position that in its narrative splendor was a true world empire. Some even announced that we had triumphantly ended history on our terms. Henceforth only American values reigned.

The attacks were not simply a violation of the national person—as in 1941—but an affront to all that was right and true. Yet its emotional symbolism had a darker side too—the suggestion, felt but unvoiced by Americans, that the attacks were the first black sign of The Fall of the City, the beginning of the end of the American sacred narrative.

Simple retribution would not be enough. We had to utterly destroy the prophecy couched in 9/11 and reassert American predestination.

This grand symbolic response—re-establishing our dignitas and reclaiming history—had to be a Great War narrative. It had to mirror, and in critical ways surpass, the mythic passage of World War II. That war reified the narrative tabernacle, but this war had an even greater charge: the divine final fulfillment of America's world mission.

So we are, as our own government tells us, in a war of civilizations—a national testing in which we will emerge triumphant, the true beacon and best hope of humankind or else find ourselves destroyed, the detritus of history. This is not simply inflated rhetoric. It is avowed American policy.

In the president's own words, it is nothing less than "the unfolding of a global ideological struggle, our time in history," pitting "progress" and "freedom" against a "mortal danger to all humanity," the "enemy of civilization." Moreover, "the call of history has come to the right country," and "the defense of freedom is worth the sacrifice." Ultimately the "evil ones" will be destroyed, and "this great country will lead the world to safety, security, and peace," a millennial world where "free peoples will own the future."

Here inevitably, rather than reflecting actual conditions, it is more important for reality to fit the sacred narrative. So for nearly four years, it has been "the Iraqi people" vs. "the killers," or more

broadly in the world of Islam, "good moderate Muslims" vs. "evil."

Does it matter whether we pursue grand drama for wholly narcissistic reasons, as long as we win? What if we don't? Failure might lead to the collapse of friendly tyrannies like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia or even to economic crisis and an expansion of the war. Longstanding alliances could come apart. But even then our military power, our vast economy, and the strength of the American people would still be intact. Strategic recovery should still be possible. The old narrative might be in tatters, but that might turn out to be a good thing because we could then build a more modest national story.

Such recovery is foreclosed, however, in a script of civilization and its enemies. Not only did American leaders go for the existential War of History instead of dealing with reality, they chose the worst possible dramatic vehicle for restaging the national passion play. For what we are experiencing is no war of civilizations. It is not even a war.

SIMPLE RETRIBUTION WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH. WE HAD TO UTTERLY DESTROY THE PROPHECY COUCHED IN 9/11.

Because the national narrative is a sacred retelling of God's message and His American mission, its periodic restaging always assumes the form of a great war—revolution, civil war, world war. But after 9/11, there was no great war to be had, so we created a simulacrum. Up to a point, we might keep it looking like a war. But at last it will not perform for us. It cannot support the demands of the drama we require. What we needed was a grand yet simple story with easy enemies and a ringing ending called victory. But our drama has shape-shifted from a war into an uncontrol-

lable force accelerating larger world transformations.

The "war" is revealing the distant contours of the end of modernity.

Modernity is the world we made for ourselves after 1941, built atop the world of European modernity, much like the ancient Romans built their international system on an earlier Hellenistic world. When we invoke modernity, it is the equivalent of antiquity saying Romanitas. The word sweeps up in its arms an entire civilized way of life: a literary and scientific canon, a political philosophy, a temple city of institutions, a complete identity.

Moreover, modernity is not simply a generalized Western vision of modern life. It is the old Romanitas reborn. Progress and prosperity, enterprise and free markets, even human freedom—humanity's best and only possibility.

Yet it is precisely this possibility, through this war, that has begun to subside.

American modernity will continue to dominate world culture and affairs for some time to come. It will yet hold even

as it slows down. And its passing, if ever finally marked, will like Rome's seem more a transformation than a collapse, more like continuity than calamity. What we see today is the beginning of its subsidence only. In metaphorical terms, think early Late Antiquity. After all, Romans at the beginning of the 3rd century still had several imperial centuries to go.

But can this whole claim be serious? Modernity, globalization, and an American world are still inevitable, are they not? Cold War victory made modernity seem unstoppable. A united Europe, a reforming Russia, and the free-market

modernization of China and India meant that America's cause had become humanity's cause.

In the 1990s, some argued that modernity was failing whole sectors of humanity. But even critics of globalization saw this as a problem of limits, disinterest, and resistance. Certainly the enterprise reached some natural boundaries. The wretched of the earth could not be instantly accommodated and uplifted. Moreover, Americans were disengaged. Desperate margins persisted in part because we ultimately cared so little for the diehards and holdouts against history living there.

Then those "dead-enders" shook globalization's storyline to its very core. 9/11 rattled our faith in modernity. "Draining the swamps" was to right forever the errors of the 1990s. But this grand drama has accomplished the opposite: it has weakened American modernity and puts its future at risk, in three ways.

First, the American war narrative rejects modernity's future constituents: its message is that we are foreclosing on them. We do this knowing that American modernity cannot long survive repossessing its promise of a universal vision for humankind.

Second, American modernity loses authority because our war promotes alternative and resistant communities. Demonizing them elevates them, and their new stature creates competing alternatives to modernity.

Third, the American war narrative shows modernity helpless in its own defense. Military failure becomes a literal stripping of our world authority, actually pushing the global future away from us.

"The Promise of American Life" flung out to the world was to be a future of universal human redemption and transcendence. Americans might argue bitterly over how to achieve this, but before the war there was no argument over the desirability of the goal.

Now two-thirds of humanity is moving away from us and from our vision of one world. While sleek Tom Friedman rhapsodizes new Silicon Valleys like Bangalore, in *Planet of Slums* Mike Davis writes, "Half of Bangalore's population lacks piped water, much less cappuccino, and there are more ragpickers and street children (90,000) than software geeks (about 60,000). In an archipelago of 10 slums, researchers found only 19 latrines for 102,000 residents."

Universal integration is no longer the human prospect but a black split

anoint, all Islamists and their communities are declared evil radicals. And if hundreds of millions so sympathize, then truthfully, is not the dark side the entire Muslim world? To make sure the point is not missed, war commentators are quick to add that Islam's civilization is decayed and failed.

But this is no simple fight with the Muslim world and Islamic civilization. This is a global war, and the very survival of our civilization is at stake. Us versus them is not Americans versus Muslims but civilization and its enemies.

RATHER THAN AN AMERICAN STORY OF GLOBAL DELIVERANCE AND REDEMPTION, THIS WAR SUBSTITUTES ITS OWN STORY OF GOOD AGAINST EVIL.

between "us" and a "surplus humanity." Globalization has become the privilege of those lucky few billions in the formal labor market. But what about the other half on their way to becoming the other two-thirds? What happens to our universal redemptive narrative in a world where modernity ends forever at 40 percent of humanity?

Even during the "slow globalization" 1990s, the story was being rewritten. Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy* helped steer us there. Repelled and horrified by his descriptions of Abidjan and Conakry, the message readers took back was: to survive, keep them all as far away as possible. No human redemption, just human consignment.

We were prepped during those years for the answer this war narrative now gives us: redefine humanity. The world of the left behind is the seedbed of the dark side—from drug lords and terrorists to medieval religious fanatics.

The Great Muslim War advances this transformation. They say that the dark side is only evil radicals—and their supporters. But listen closely: except for the tiny handful of "moderate Muslims" we

Thus our transfigured narrative can keep its titular universalism as it expands the enemy "other" beyond ragtag Takfiris to something really big: the Demiurge, the great Evil. If we are civilization, then the full enemy, in our unspoken logic, is the entire amniotic sea of dark humanity birthing and succoring attackers. Universalism is bent to the service of grand struggle.

The Great Muslim War replaces the story of globalization without formally discarding it. This is metamorphosis by association, linking what is wretched with what is evil, transfigured from those lost to modernity to the very enemies of modernity. The world's left behind morph from our moral responsibility into dark forces we must subdue. Rather than an American story of global deliverance and redemption, this war substitutes its own story of good against evil, of civilization against the night. Instead of us reaching to the ends of the earth with the promise of American life, our promise is contingent on submission: "You are either with us or against us."

This is promoting strong counter-movements among "the global other."

Alternative communities are everywhere, and to us they are the very picture of illegitimacy, deviance, and criminality. There are, for example, 100,000 gang members in El Salvador and Honduras and entire states in Brazil and Mexico ruled by drug lords. In Brazil's cities, perhaps 20 percent of the municipal core is beyond government control.

Now spread this Latin landscape to the whole world. To Somalia, where Islamic courts bring some kind of order out of chaos. To the Brotherhood in Egypt, where Islamists offer the only real social services people will ever know, in the face of a ruling class as corrupt as any since late antiquity. To Waziristan, Baluchistan, the Muslim parts of Thailand, the Moros, Chechnya, Aceh, and the Tamils. Even to Hamas and Hezbollah.

Our clinical term is "non-state actor," living in a world of "ungoverned areas"—as though their local governance is "unrule," their living communities "unsocieties." They are merely human black holes to be mopped up and shut down. We see only our labels of cool acronym and hot "terrorist."

Superficially this may look a bit like Cold War days, when every "liberation movement" set off "communist" klaxons. But this is not then. Back then, the dark force was the Soviet Union, Third World seducer.

The real Cold War analogy is in the Soviet metaphor itself. Thus the "Islamofascist" threat equals the Soviet threat, requiring an equivalent struggle. But unlike the Cold War, our survival now depends not on deterrence but literally on destruction.

This story has remarkable implications for alternative communities. Our Islamofascist branding makes every movement of Muslim resistance an attack on us. Yet most resistance instead speaks to local yearnings. By seeing an enemy of civilization in every Muslim non-state actor, we

unthinkingly widen the struggle. Alternative communities are indelible in the "evil" world landscape painted by the global war on terrorism—the ongoing metamorphosis of the global other into the Mordor of our imagination.

Then there are meta-communities of piety. Modernity's greatest failure is spiritual—neon-lit in Europe, where old piety has crashed and burned. But among the global other scorched by modernity's "creative destruction," it is not that people have abandoned piety but that it has abandoned them. In globalization's mixing bowl, the meditative power of old ethos has been lost. Yet American modernity offers nothing to take its place: just ask an Afghani or an Iraqi.

Piety is a cry for meaning in a stripped world. Two movements stand out: the Pentecostalist and the Islamist. Both share a deep repudiation of the Western nation state as the supreme human ideal—not because they are intrinsically anti-Western but because they see modernity as antithetical to what people need. If this seems harsh, just feel the fervor and the fulfillment they offer.

Calling them throwbacks from a primitive past denies what we need to see: that modernity itself has been stripping, not giving. Denial robs us of insight into what people need, while calling their piety "primitive" encourages us to see the global other as a lesser humanity. We have after all declared that the lowest bar we will accept for Muslims is "moderate Islam," where we will ratify what is correct.

Like American modernity, Romans also presided over a humanity left behind, a welter of cults jostling in the social and spiritual vacuum. Romans also proscribed resister cults, defining Christians the way we define terrorists—as threats to civilization. Yet then, as now, the spiritual alternatives people sought could not be controlled. The great success stories then were Christianity and

Islam. Today's evangelists reach back to their passionate origins: the martyrs of the early Church and Al Ansar, the brotherhood of Muhammad. We fear to face the passionate fusion of alternative community and transcendental faith because the prospect of true meta-communities of piety leverages and multiplies the energies of local resistance.

In modernity's youth, those who resisted simply ended up as notches on history's belt, the fate of all who stand in the way of progress. What is different today is that resistance grows everywhere in the face of modernity's "power." They are fighters—and they know how to beat us. Ideas, visions, and sacrifice meant nothing in the Victorian face of the Maxim gun, but our grand war narrative has endowed a counter-narrative of resistance.

The Great Muslim War showcases this achievement, creating dramatic stagings that we cannot win and that paradoxically become the gift of transcendence to our enemy. Witness Iraq, Afghanistan, and Southern Lebanon. Botched stagings pressure local tyrant allies—Saudi princes, Pakistani generals, and Egyptian pharaohs. We find ourselves scrambling to prop them up, visibly giving the lie to our public values. Remarkably, our war story makes its sacred centerpiece—modernity—look backward and repressive.

We declare that "resistance is futile," yet the opposite is true. The bigger we make the enemy, the bigger they become. Ours is the complicity of backhand legitimization. Whether we admit this or shout the reverse, effectively our war narrative works to set up superpower defeat—even if at first it seems only a drama of defeat played out in the media—because with one stroke, our narrative itself will have become a lie. This is doubly destructive. Not only do we fail myth—what are we? the D-list to the Greatest Generation—but myth is

no longer there for us. World War II cannot save us because according to the strictures of our own myth, we are no longer worthy of being saved.

The bell toll for modernity is victorious resistance through New War. Our enforcers have other ways of describing it: irregular war, asymmetrical war, unconventional war, guerilla war, fourth-generation war, anti-terrorism, counter-insurgency. But what do these filtered images tell us about ourselves? This is underhanded war, dirty war, war with those beneath us.

This is an interesting problem. We want to fight a clean war with those like us. On the other hand, while we pursue the war we like, the other pursues the war that promises survival and transcendence. Clausewitz himself ratified New War's power. He said that strategy at its most existential "is the use of the engagement for the purposes of the war."

The unrecognized armed community seeks to use "the engagement" for its desperate purposes: survival and then realization—to be independent.

This makes engagement with an unrecognized armed community fundamentally different from battle with another nation state, which is all about negotiating relative advantage within the context of an already well-established relationship. But as we avoid relationships with unrecognized armed communities, we deny their right to exist. This puts us in a difficult position because as we deny them, we unite them. They fight with every fiber, and for us to win, we must be Roman in our ruthlessness. But we are unwilling to kill on that scale. Before we even enter into combat, we are weaker and they are stronger.

Our war is about attacking the objects that define enemy forces with things that go boom. Their war is about their people achieving authority and turning it into legitimacy. Making the war about their goals weakens us.

War is where the people are, and our "engagement space" is where the people are not: the battlefield where armies and their weapons fight. Their engagement space is the heart of their inmost community. The whole people are the fight, so we are forced to fight them all. Not all are armed, but all are participants.

Our weapons are sacred things anointed by holy technology. In contrast, they are their weapons. In a city, our weapons cannot be used to full effect because they cannot be used indiscriminately against people. Their human metaphor focuses on the fighter, using all at hand for the fight. Hence the consistently adaptable effectiveness of his IED. The ultimate people-weapon is the suicide bomber, and the martyr-bomb is smarter than any U.S. technology. Unrelenting suicide attacks claim authority within their engagement space over an enemy whose first consideration is "force protection."

They will not fight on our terms, they will not fight in our engagement space, and our weapons are ineffective against them. Yet we deny that the enemy dictates the terms of battle. We tell ourselves that we are "taking the battle to the enemy," but we are really giving the enemy a path to victory.

Killing them boosts their cause. "Shock and awe" creates an instant transcendental experience for resistant communities—their own London Blitz. Shared sacrifice is a mythic passage of becoming: the way through blood war to a new and triumphant collective identity, as though the energy we lavish on them flows into them.

Fighting the Great State is a path to legitimacy. Surviving is not only winning, it is rising and being transformed. The Great One you fight raises you up and speaks your name to the world. We are midwives. Our efforts help birth a future that works against us.

The United States is actively dismantling its own paradigm of modernity. Someday we may understand what has been lost, but now we unconsciously celebrate our passing. Forever War makes the fall perversely satisfying as it becomes more necessary than modernity.

We have forced a fateful transformation of our sacred narrative. America is now tasked with bringing the dark side to submission. But of course we have neither the means nor the will to do so. The Great Muslim War will keep us locked in, so the more we thrash within our story, the more we will undo ourselves. Our narrative has blocked every exit. Escape officially equals retreat, and retreat equals utter defeat. We must never quit the fight—meaning we remain willing participants to our final fall.

This is our defeat-dynamic: We have set up non-state triumph in Iraq, no matter when or how we leave it. We have ensured the eventual collapse of our *ancien regime* nation-states. We have no relationship with revolutionary communities that will succeed them.

Tragically, the transformation of the American narrative is no simple, awful misstep. It is no neocon excursion that simply needs to be recalled, at which point a sound course will set things right. We created our inescapable struggle with Islam—and the world's awareness is unraveling American modernity, whose existence always depended on its confident future. This is finished.

Years may pass before this becomes clear. So cries for a rejuvenated liberal internationalism will shout down their own irrelevance. They will get all the air-time they want in the national conversation because they are performing an essential service. They reassure national elites that our historical disaster can be reversed by a stroke of policy. But over time, the oratory will wear so thin that reality will at last be naked: our universal story is now chaff to the wind like

the grand narratives of all empires.

America's destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan mobilized the Muslim world against us, but more than that it put the global other on notice. For much of the West and most of Islam, the lie of modernity as American altruism is dying in Iraq. Americans care about the death of their soldiers but barely a whit for the destruction of a society wrought in the name of "democracy."

Our future now veers wildly from the Cold War's end, when our sacred narrative touched fulfillment. We thought we were moments from finishing the Lord's work. Now the Lord's work is killing Islamists.

A great nation continues to marshal its collective power, but it will face a changed world. There will still be grand nations like China, India, and others. The United States survives, in material terms greater than ever. But its war narrative has helped to birth a changed world and to cast off its claim to the universal. There will also be a weltering of new human combinations and re-combinations.

The subsiding of modernity may be liberating. Freed from the world center, we might find a safer place to survey an evolving humanity. No longer the object of all attack, we might productively rethink our national purpose. Old modernity's institutions and practices will be folded into, and thus partly lost within, a new world-cultural mix. This may not be our preferred outcome. But losing our claim to the universal opens the way to new realities. We might take comfort that American modernity will be a part of them.

We might take comfort too in being history's greatest midwife to change, if also to our own undoing. ■

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A special group at the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center, very similar to the group that tracked the activity of al-Qaeda through the 1990s, has been working on the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah over the past three years.

In the wake of the failed Israeli incursion into Lebanon last summer, the White House asked these Hezbollah analysts to provide a comprehensive assessment of the organization, its tactics, and its leaders. A team of analysts headed by an experienced senior officer completed the report over a month ago and concluded, surprisingly, that Hezbollah is actually a collection of diverse interest groups, and its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, far from being a fanatic controlled by Tehran, is a fairly nuanced and astute politician who has maintained his independence from the Mullahs. It also indicated that Hezbollah's threat to American interests has been seriously overstated. The report recommended that the U.S. government make an effort to establish a dialogue with Nasrallah in an attempt to moderate his organization's more extreme policies; it suggested strongly that Nasrallah would likely be receptive to such an approach. The more politically sensitized senior managers of the CIA analytical division took one look at the report, were shocked by its conclusions, and sent it back to the Counter Terrorism Center for reconsideration and redrafting in a form that would be more politically acceptable to the White House.



Reports that an Iranian scientist working on Iran's nuclear program has been assassinated by the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, appear to be the latest in a series of deliberate fabrications.

Ardeshire Hassanpour, who died on Jan. 15, was an award-winning and internationally known scientist who worked at a plant in Isfahan where uranium hexafluoride gas is produced. The gas is used in the centrifuge-based enrichment process to generate nuclear fuel for the main Iranian research center at Natanz, and initial reports suggested that Hassanpour had died of "gas poisoning," though the Iranian authorities did not hint of any unusual circumstances or foul play. Hassanpour's death was first reported without additional comment by Prague-based *Radio Farda*, which broadcasts in Farsi into Iran and is funded by the U.S. Department of State. It was subsequently reported by the U.S.-based private information service Straffor, which has close ties to Israeli intelligence and suggested that the Mossad was possibly involved. The story was then picked up and further relayed by Rupert Murdoch's *Times of London*, which has often served as an outlet for Israeli disinformation and has also been reporting very alarming but usually erroneous information about Iran. Several U.S. intelligence sources believe that the Israelis have only limited intelligence capabilities inside Iran and that the story of Hassanpour's assassination is, in fact, a fabrication produced by Mossad to frighten Iranian scientists working on Iran's nuclear program, making them worry that they might be assassinated next. Hassanpour is certainly dead, but he most likely died in an accident, not because he was targeted and killed.

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