

## How do you confront a century?

ZIA MIAN | Dec 01, 2003

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There's a funny thing about naming empires. There was the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the French Empire, even the Belgians had an empire. Those are the kinds of empires that we've grown up with. They are empires which identify a people and a place as the carriers of that empire.

Yet people seldom, today, refer to the US Empire. The US doesn't like to refer to itself this way. In 1941, Henry Luce wrote his famous essay in *Life* magazine about the American Century. Sixty years later, the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) advocates what it calls "American global leadership". The PNAC brings together the likes of Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and other key members of the Bush administration. They claim the next hundred years are 'ours'.

They're claiming not a place, but every place, for the next hundred years. So, the US empire is both intrinsically global and not actually, necessarily, about occupying territory per se. The implication, of course, is that whether you want it or not, you're all within the boundaries of the American Empire, whether you are in Pakistan or Botswana. Because you are all living in the Twentieth Century and now the Twenty-first Century. How do you confront a century?

Empire is not just about geography and history, it's about a relationship. Too often, we use a lazy notion of empire. We think of Roman legions, British ships, American troops chasing up and down. The important aspect about the imperial relationship

are those who are willing to collaborate with empire. There are not just economic dependencies, but social and cultural ones.

In analysing 19<sup>th</sup> century British novels, the late Edward Said pointed out that underneath all the politeness of society, there is this substructure of domination and exploitation at work. Said reminds us to pay attention to what's there, but not spelt out. This is the architecture of the building. Don't just look at the interior decor.

Now the Bush administration has embraced imperialism as a policy. This is not a matter of any debate or dispute. If you read their most recent imperial edict, it's called the National Security Strategy of the United States, September, 2002. It starts out by saying, "The United States possesses unprecedented and unequal strength and influence in the world". Unprecedented and unequal. Strength and influence. It draws distinctions between these things that are important. In other words, we are capable of being imperialists.

Second, this is a time of opportunity for America. In other words, the US government plans to use its strength and influence to extend imperial control. The third part is the classic imperial rationale. The aim of this strategy, it says, is to help make the world not just safer but better. We're going to make the whole world better. How can you argue with that

What do you say? But all empire builders make the same spurious claim.

Many of the people who are in power in the George W Bush administration, were also there in the first President Bush's administration. They produced in 1992 this infamous document called *Defense Planning Guidance 1992*. It was written for Cheney by Wolfowitz and others at the end of the Cold War to say, OK, we won. What do we do now?

Our first objective, it says, is to prevent the reemergence of a new rival either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere. The strategy requires that we

endeavour to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region. Cheney and friends are not just talking about dominating the world, they're saying we're not even going to let any power arise that can dominate a region of the world, especially a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. In other words, the route to power is through control of the resources that are in regions. We will not let any power gain control over those resources, even in their own region.

But there are inconsistencies, of course, because in the pursuit of empire, of political collaboration rather than just brute force, you have to work with the people who are in charge in all these other countries. Power often only recognises power. So what does the US do? it says, well, who's the most powerful institution in these countries? It's usually the military. What does the military want? More guns. So, we'll sell them some. Then the military will be our friends and that's the end of that. They won't want to fight us because we sell them guns.

So it should come as no surprise that consistently now, for over a decade, the US has been overwhelmingly the largest global supplier of weapons to the world. As a single state it is now responsible for over 45 percent of all the arms sales in the world. That leaves the other 192 countries in the world making up the rest. Now, you'd think selling weapons when you're trying to rule the world was a bad idea. But, empire has contradictions. You want to work with institutions that are powerful, you want a currency that you can deal with them in and so then you sell them guns. Sometimes those guns are turned against you, and you're stuck. Since the US has more weapons, it presumes it will prevail.