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America must grasp world's complexity

*The post-war struggle to rebuild Iraq is getting bogged down because of the coalition's failure to understand the history, culture and faith of the country. **Dr Gëzim Alpion** argues this is nothing new, but this time the US and UK have to get it right for the sake of the whole world.*

It was a telling moment. During a recent broadcast James Rubin, former American assistant secretary of state, struggled to explain to a largely sceptical audience that America did not employ a double-standard foreign policy, especially not towards Muslims.

When challenged, poor Mr Rubin produced quite a gem. He retorted that no one could accuse his country of being unfair to Muslims or Muslim countries and he was keen to mention the case of Kosovo.

'In Kosovo,' as he put it, 'we attacked a Western state to protect Muslims!'

As an academic and a writer I don't necessarily expect politicians, no matter where they come from, to have read widely on or be thoroughly informed of 'trivial' and 'light-weight' subjects such as history and theology.

As a British citizen, however, I am disturbed when our politicians employ the same hypocritical rhetoric.

In all fairness to our sensible politicians, they are hardly as outspoken as their unelected American colleagues in preaching and defending the West's moral crusades to 'protect' Muslims in the Balkans, especially those in Kosovo, and around the world. And the reasons could not be more obvious.

Such a blunder would not only undermine our newly born 'ethical foreign policy' but also unearth some rather embarrassing facts about our not so ethical foreign policy in the past in some corners of the world, especially in the Balkans. There in the wake of the demise of the Ottoman Empire we played our part in carving up the region much at the expense of Mr Rubin's voiceless Muslims of Kosovo and Albania.

As someone who believes more in humanity rather than in nationalism and religion, like many others in this country and throughout Western democracies, I had the impression that when Nato attacked Yugoslavia in 1999, it was not attacking a 'Western state' but Milosevic's brutal regime which had surpassed even the Nazis in its ethnic cleansing policy in Croatia, Bosnia and especially in Kosovo. Likewise, I thought and hoped that the year 1999 would mark a much welcome turning-point in the way we in the West would handle from then onwards cases of gross violation of human rights, both on our doorstep and in the far corners of the world.

No-one in his right mind would deny the crucial role the US played in bringing to an end the sickening brutality we witnessed day in, day out, over the last decade throughout the former Frankenstein state of Yugoslavia.

But the fact that we and the Americans helped the peoples in the Balkans to gain their freedom does not give us the right to keep them hostage for our favours to them.

In referring to Milosevic's version of Yugoslavia as a 'Western state' and Kosovans as merely 'Muslims', Mr Rubin is obviously unaware that the Serbs arrived in Europe less than 12 centuries ago and that their victims, Mr Rubin's Muslim beneficiaries from Kosovo, happen to be the descendants of one of the most ancient European nations, the Albanians.

Mr Rubin obviously has no idea that the forefathers of today's Albanian Muslims (by the way, Mr Rubin, not all Kosovans, certainly not all Albanians, are Muslims) were among the earliest Europeans to welcome Christianity and five centuries before the pagan Serbs were convinced by Greek missionaries to follow the teachings of Christ.

In dubbing the Kosovans 'Muslims', Mr Rubin is preaching a patronising attitude towards those 'outsider' Europeans who, for various reasons, happen not to share at the moment the West's 'official' religion. That the ancestors of the present day non-Christian Albanians struggled for decades in the latter part of the 14th century and throughout the 15th century to defend their country, their Christian faith and Catholic Europe from the invading Turkish hordes who (like all invaders) used the religious card to justify their wars and sanctify their gains, apparently is of no importance to Mr Rubin.

The West has undoubtedly given the tone to human civilisation in the last two millennia, and Christianity has been an inestimable driving force behind our achievements. But the foundations of Western civilisation are not purely or mainly of Christian nature.

The Mesopotamians, Persians, and Ancient Egyptians (not to mention the Chinese, Indians or the Aztecs) have contributed in making us in the West who we are not less than the ancient people of Greece, Albania and Italy, who before the advent of Christianity were – you guessed it – not Christians!

The Americans are entitled to run their country as they please and I am sure that with their 400 years of history they have now understood the significance every nation and civilisation attaches to its cultural heritage. Americans, however, do not necessarily understand every corner of the world and certainly not Europe.

If we Europeans want a stable and multi-cultural Europe, we have to realise earlier rather than later that we need to have a multi-religious Europe.

A country like Turkey, for instance, has still a lot to do in terms of respecting human rights, but are we refusing to accept Turkey in the EC just for this and this reason only or mainly because the Turks happen not to have the ‘right’ religion at this particular moment in time?

A country like Turkey, where religious extremists have not been allowed to apply their narrow-minded and dangerous version of Islam, would be an asset to the EC because it would serve as a good example to other Muslim countries in the world aspiring to adopt democracy.

We Europeans need a new common strategy now that America is the only superpower. America is and will always be our ally.

Whether we like it or not, even in the future we won’t be able to sort out future conflicts in Europe on our own, not if we continue to bicker as we usually do.

The fact that we need and will continue to need America, however, does not mean that we should not remind our American friends that their arrogance is unacceptable. The recent rift over Iraq has damaged and divided us Europeans as no other conflict before since the Cold War. We have to sort out together the mess we find ourselves in at the moment and we have to do it as soon as possible.

We the British in particular are in a unique position to continue in our role as bridge-builders between our American friends beyond the pond and our allies on the Continent.

Let us not forget, however, that no matter how well meaning we are, it requires two shores to build a bridge.

We should not sacrifice our relationship with our European partners no matter how dear America is to us. Britain's future is in Europe.

As for the Americans, they will probably one day understand that the world is a much wider and complex place than they think at the moment.

If they won't then F. Scott Fitzgerald warns us in *The Great Gatsby* what they might do: 'They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...'

I only hope that this time the Americans, and the British for that matter, do not turn their backs on the Iraqi people.

If we do, then the mistrust, which already exists between the West and the Arab world, Christians and Muslims, not to mention amongst other regions,

religions, cultures and civilisations across the globe, will widen further thus putting all of us on the edge of an apocalyptic abyss.

- *Dr Gëzim Alpion is a lecturer in English and cultural studies at the University of Birmingham and a published author.*