ALJAZEERA

OPINION / UNITED STATES

Why American lives matter most

America's racism and narcissism is the reason why its foreign affairs are a mere projection of its domestic ills.

by **Donald Earl Collins**
8 Apr 2018

A delegate waves a "Make America First Again" sign on the floor during the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, US [Brian Snyder/Reuters]

Twenty-five years ago, when I was a second-year graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh, I overheard a conversation between an instructor and an undergraduate student who had recently served during the Gulf War in 1991. The young veteran expressed disappointment that the powers-that-were had curtailed the military offensive,

limiting the US-led blitzkrieg to Kuwait and southern Iraq. What he said to the instructor next had my ears burning. "We [the US military] should've turned the whole place [the Middle East] into a nice sheet of glass!" the young man said with glee.

While the instructor let go this student's quip about how the US and its Western allies should've considered nuking as many as 100 million humans as an alternative to Operation Desert Storm, I couldn't. It has always amazed me how easily Americans of every stripe could so easily write off people's lives the world over. And it's as true in 2018 as it was in 1993, as President Trump's newly appointed National Security Adviser John Bolton recently made the "legal case" for a pre-emptive attack against North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

The world needs to understand the historical and psychological motivations behind the imperialism that drives American geopolitics and allows Americans to devalue so many lives. The forces that have dictated America's domestic and economic desires are the same ones that drive its foreign policy and its military interventions. America's racism has allowed it to continually discount the people it has killed in the name of freedom and democracy in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East as merely "collateral damage". America's narcissism has enabled it to see the world as valuable only when it can obtain specific natural resources. Both have allowed its leaders to make the world a playground for its weapons.

America's malignant racism and narcissism explain why President Donald Trump can get away with crass phrases like "America first" and "sh****le countries". Both narcissism and racism account for why the US has cared more about what happened to four Americans in Libya in 2012 than it has about Boko Haram in Nigeria or Syrian forces bombing innocent children in Eastern Ghouta. America's racism is at work when the US turns a blind eye to atrocities such as the humanitarian crisis born of Myanmar's ethnic cleansing of some 700,000 Rohingya now in Bangladesh. America's narcissism is why is there such a stark distance between America the ideal superpower, who claims to be "the leader of the free world," and America the narcissistic superpower, who only cares about herself.

This uniquely American mix of self-aggrandisement to materially benefit a select few on the basis of Whiteness has evolved over centuries. The tree of America as an empire grew out of its 170-year-long roots as a British colony. One where a class of nouveau riche plantation slave owners thought themselves the equals of their English counterparts in the House of Lords. The idea of empire sprouted as the new US declared itself the protector of Western Hemisphere via the Monroe Doctrine. All while using the idea of Manifest Destiny as the impetus for taking half of Mexico's original territories, not to mention invading Haiti and depriving Cuba of both fair trade deals and an unencumbered democratic process. Native Americans faced the same double-dealing for more than a century, as the US government nullified treaty after treaty in favour of railroad companies, mining interests, and a genocidal policy of "Indian removal".

World War II, though, was America's coming-out party as a freshly minted superpower. For so many Americans, Pearl Harbor wasn't just a sneak attack; it was the ultimate betrayal. Japanese atrocities at Bataan and elsewhere helped further Americans' lack of empathy towards Japanese civilians. Add to Pearl Harbor and Bataan America's pre-war anti-Japanese racism and the zero-sum brutality with which both the US and Japanese militaries fought each other. When Gallup's pollsters asked Americans about what should happen to Japan and the Japanese at the end of the war, American attitudes had hardened over time. While 29 percent of Americans wanted Japan "destroy[ed] as a nation" in the 1942 poll, by December 1944, the number had grown to 33 percent. Another 13 percent wanted to "kill them". The US paved the road to dropping WMDs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and killing 250,000 civilians with its own narcissistic belief that it was an innocent bystander whom "them Japs" drew into war.

The nearly two-decade-long US military involvement in Southeast Asia serves as another example of the ease with which Americans have denied the humanity of people of colour. American leaders narcissistically believed in their own good intentions, all while often indiscriminately killing Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong peoples. According to the BMJ, as many as 3.8 million Vietnamese died during the US-inspired conflict between North and South Vietnam. General William Westmoreland (one of the architects of the Vietnam War) defended the hefty death and destruction, saying, "They are Asians who don't think about death the way we do". America's imperialistic policies, performed

in the name of anti-communism, led to an almost complete lack of empathy among ordinary American soldiers, who narcissistically dehumanised their "enemy" as "gooks" in order to "win."

However, with the end of the Cold War in 1989, and more so since 9/11, a key part of American military interventions the globe over has been an increasing insistence on injecting American-style democracy into allegedly less civilized parts of the world. It no longer matters if there's a bigger enemy like Japan or if there's Soviet aggression to fight. As then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on NBC's Today Show in reference to Iraq in March 1998, "if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."

Albright's statement is an indispensable and utterly narcissistic one to the point of delusions of god-like powers. The "indispensable nation" is also a wonderful way of saying that the US is #1, come heaven, hell, or high water, or rather, Iraq and Afghanistan. Drones and missiles have mostly replaced tanks and armies in the years since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, to be sure. But like narcissists, who believe that they are "extraordinary and exceptional," America continues to believe itself to be a superpower who's a "global force for good," as Keith David narrated in "America's Navy" commercials in 2014.

That nations tend to only care about what happens to their own isn't news. Humans "are naturally more concerned with domestic issues than [with] what is happening elsewhere around the world," an editor once told me regarding the insular tendencies of news coverage. Sure, the British promoted their brand of imperialism as one that "civilized" the world. But no nation in modern history has been as good as promoting itself and its projection of power as a sign of its unselfish goodness as the US. America's racism and narcissism, well-honed over the previous four centuries, is the reason why its foreign affairs are a mere projection of America's domestic ills. They will continue to be for as long as the US remains a world power because America cannot get over itself.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.