

Liberty's lesions

America's hyperchaos has become antithetical to its cherished liberal values

Of late, the "victory of liberalism" has become a pampered notion in both the liberal camps as well as in the camps of its critics. The victory has prompted Francis Fukuyama to declare the "end of history", and he believes that liberal philosophy is now without rivals, possessing a universal appeal.

This seems good. For, as proved by the "Soviet sanctuary", the demoralisation and dehumanisation that set in were not only because of forces of oppression, but because of the failure of the doctrinaire way of life. The "new class", which is a product of the post-Cold War era, has become a subscriber to the Lincolnian dictum. What has been won in the process is not only things political, but also the myth of prosperity and viability of a liberal society.

But if the Soviet downfall proved the dangers involved in mistaking a mannequin for a human face, the pros and cons of the liberal ethos, too, merit scrutiny. This deemphasis is not a socialist pretension. Far from it. A deeper probe into the veneer of democracy is indeed mandatory, because the Oklahoma blast is not the only item in the Pandora's box of the modern age.

The onus of criticism, vis a vis Oklahoma, has naturally to be borne by the United States, for this country is not only supposed to be the greatest of democracies, but also claims to be the guardian of liberal values in the world. Therefore, its goings on demand critical review. Making a catalogue of the various criticisms against US usually reflects an over emphasis on the nation's political parameters, thus overlooking two vital aspects. First, the concept of a culture that has given rise to a body of idiom which is more potent than any napalm. Second, the "vision of man", an image totally antithetical to what the Reds stood for.

The first is a fundamental component of the neo-colonialist enterprise. It is shipped to other countries courtesy images of heroes of glamour events such as Oscars and Grammys and of fiction of the paperback variety. The second, the "vision of man", is diffused through academically brewed paradigms of social realities. Together, these two cultural

exports provide a point of vantage from which the US has been able, time and again, to draw, redraw and legitimise its own version of "magic reality", at national, international and supernational levels. Such activities draw their energy from a "mania for freedom", a spirit best embodied in the emotive words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

The American habit of teaching lessons to the rest of the world is not a post-World War II phenomenon. Nor is it a product of Cold War logic. It is embedded in the psyche of the US elite and masses. Successive generations have only validated what Senator J. Beveridge wrote in 1899: "The trade of the world must and shall be ours...our institutions will follow our trade on the wings of our commerce...And American law, American order and American civilisation will plant themselves on shores hith-

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erto bloody". And John Kennedy said: "The cause of all mankind, is the cause of America...We are responsible for maintenance of freedom."

This collective desire has influenced US foreign policy and the nation's attempts at social engineering, in the name of the elusive ideal — freedom. This, of course, has led the US to regularise military intervention and sometimes violence, as a necessary adjunct to the maintenance of its own version of peace. "We", secretary of the navy, Francis P. Matthews, said in 1950, "will be the first aggressors for peace." He hoped that it "would earn us a proud and popular title". Richard Nixon went on record saying: "I consider the department of defence to be the department of peace". Certain diplomatic moves by the US on the international stage, have convinced its own citizens of the effectiveness of violence.

The Oklahoma incident is just an expected reflection of a violence smeared society — the perpetrators of which learnt the lesson of the gun from their political bosses. "If crime is as American as pie, then its social ethos is a hymn to personal indulgence," wrote R. Segal. A hoarding carried the message:

"Buy as a wife, buy as a mother, as a woman — but buy". "And what are they going to buy"? Dwight Eisenhower was once faced with this question. He promptly replied, "Anything". Unfortunately, this spirit of consumerism has seduced the poor third world citizens, convinced that "right politics" begins with a materially prosperous society.

Although the US's increasing political hegemony has become a cause for concern, it could be undermined politically if the dream of an unified Europe becomes a reality. But it will yet maintain a position of socio-cultural dominance as long as it communicates to the rest of the world the vision of a superior society.

Attacking materialistic values of the US will remain ineffectual if the process of the mythologising of a free society, and the methods employed to sustain the myth are overlooked.

Liberal society, stripped of its glamour, presents the picture of an atomised individual. Even the rise of a welfare state has led to what Marcuse termed "progressive brutalisation and moronisation of man" because it has tended to arrest social change. Thus, the concept of mass democracy is a facade, and "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilisations." One such expression of this is violence, which, in turn, gives rise to a host of psycho-social problems. In the US, a majority of hospital beds are occupied by the mentally ill, rather than by those who have physical ailments.

Inevitably, the US habit of countering violence betrays its pretensions of democracy. Arbitrary and ruthless measures are employed to curb acts of violence. By pretending that wiping out the culprits in individual acts such incidents will not be repeated merely exposes the sovereign state's inability to contain violence. A state that is guided by materialist concerns, becomes a haven for explosive elements. Thus the debate of what constitutes the desirable is not over. Fukuyama's contention is, in fact, the beginning of the search for a reconciling of the differences between liberal rhetoric and liberal practice.