

In 1958, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer wrote a novel provocatively titled, 'The Ugly American'. The novel, defined by allusion and metaphor and set in a fictional nation called Sarkhan, aimed and attempted to bring to the attention of Americans the ungainly behaviour of Americans overseas and contrasted it with the behaviour and attitude of others. The others in contention here were the communists. The novel was a political oeuvre and the context and backdrop for it was the Cold War- the titanic struggle between the United States and the former Soviet Union. It deemed the attitude of Americans in the Vietnam War as stemming from arrogance and insensitivity to local cultures, opines Wajahat Qazi.

The novel also drew out the irony and the paradox through the impressions of an Asian journalist who is bewildered at the Americans who he knows in America and Americans overseas. A total contrast defines the two. It then draws attention to the protagonist of the novel, Homer Atkins - a person with an ugly demeanour but noble disposition - who mixes and fraternizes with the locals, understands them and offers genuine empathy and useful assistance. The novel, in short, was meant to be an eye-opener. It incidentally became a best seller and was made into a movie.

Unfortunately and alas, the lessons of the book appear not to have been learnt. America overseas indeed is a misunderstood behemoth and this misunderstanding accrues from what could be called American naivete which is presumed to be arrogance given the country's overweening power and might.

This assertion calls for a very brief exegesis on the nature of the United States: The country, to an outsider, cannot really be pinned down and a perspective brought to bear on it. It is a massive cauldron of peoples which has over the years morphed from a white settler country into a multicultural country but yet paradoxes define it. There is a line that divides blue America from the red America: The red America is insular and parochial; blue America cosmopolitan and open. The battles between the two Americas have been called 'culture wars'. And then there is black America, an America bruised and wounded- psychically and spiritually. In these America's, a 'red' American can easily mistake an Iraqi for Indian or scratch his head over where Kashmir is; a blue American, to the contrary can surprise one with his/her knowledge of cultures, world affairs, nuance, sophistication and insight. America can then not be pigeon holed or reduced to a stereotype.

This is America from outside looking in. Then there is America, the superpower, the mighty and potent America- responsible for maintaining world peace and order; or resolving disputes and problems and exporting its immense cultural and soft power overseas. This America's foreign policy determines the drift and thrust of world politics. The images of the two Americas are difficult to reconcile.

The question that this raises is what accounts for the discrepancy between the nature of America and its perception overseas? The answer lies in America's naive approach towards the world - especially the Muslim world. First, it was the self righteousness of the neo cons that led to misadventurism in Iraq. It was premised on a belief that democracy and liberalism could be exported. And now it is the deafening silence that America has maintained over the butchery in Syria. The Arab Muslims may be justified in their bewilderment, fail to understand American activism in Iraq and then total and complete withdrawal from their affairs when they needed American support most. Any reasonable mind would deem it as hypocritical and attribute Machiavellianism to Americans. This however is not even a caricature. Foreign policy is driven by a host of considerations and cannot be reduced to one factor.

Anyhow, this is besides the point here. What is intriguing and alarming is America's banning of a group in Syria which has made military gains against the obnoxious Assad regime. This outfit, Jabhat ul Nusra has made gains against the regime is popular with people. The United

States believes that it has links with Al Qaeda. I know nothing about it but what I know about Americans is that the banning may be premised on a blanket dismissal of all Islamist groups and deeming them to be hostile to America. This is not necessarily the case. Not all Islamists are the same. There are variations within them ideologically, programmatically and practically. Some are extreme and will not countenance the West in any form or shape; others are moderate and would like to engage in some sort of a dialogue with the West or the United States. The United State's blanket dismissals estrange and alienate these moderates and accord leeway and strength to the extremists. Islamism as a comprehensively opposed ideology or movement to the West or the United States then becomes a self fulfilling prophece - a premise that needs to be pre-empted. The relations between Islam and the West are delicately poised. They can go anywhere. Prudence demands that even straws be clutched at and some sort of a meeting ground and dialogic mechanism be arrived at lest the relationship degenerate into something ugly and insalubrious. Jabhat ul Nusra may or may not have links to Al Qaeda. The issue is broader. Let the Americans reread , 'The Ugly American' , introspect, mull over the essence of the book and then re-engage with the world. It is about time.