A troubling turn in American history

By James Carroll | October 8, 2007

IF COLUMBUS is the beginning of the story, and, say, Lincoln is the middle, what is the end? Each episode of the American narrative surfaced a problem, which prompted attempts to resolve it, which led in turn to a new problem. This movement from problem to resolution to new problem and ever new efforts to fix things is what makes the American story great.

So Columbus arrived in 1492, but carried the European virus of ideological absolutism - what led Queen Isabella to expel Jews from Spain that same year. Such absolutism sparked Old World religious wars, and Puritan dissenters defied it by coming to America. But they brought their own version of that absolutism. John Winthrop's City on a Hill was a religiously gated community (no "pagans" or Quakers), with the magistrate empowered to coerce conformity. Therefore Roger Williams proposed the separation of church and state. By Jefferson's time, though, that distinction justified the separation of private morality from public ethics. Private morality meant he and others could keep the private property called slaves.

Abraham Lincoln presided at the altar on which the bloody sacrifice of civil war was justified by "freedom," but no sooner had redemptive violence ("... as He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free") saved the nation's soul than it spawned the Indian genocide, and the Jim Crow betrayal of blacks. In the name of freedom, the United States conquered a continent, and claimed a hemisphere - a destiny whose virtue was manifest against corrupt European imperialism. In the American Century, the nation born in rejection of ideological absolutism called itself capital of "the free world," but redemptive violence went nuclear, and defense of that freedom required absolute readiness to destroy the world. The chill of Cold War "realism" froze the American conscience.
An unexpected thaw (warming Gorbachev and Reagan) ended the Cold War bloodlessly, and America had a chance to redefine national redemption, removing violence from its center. That brings us to today. If this nation followed the pattern of its own historic reckoning with the ever unfinished work of public morality, political discourse would be defined by the dual-project of eliminating nuclear weapons and building international structures of peace. Instead, we are paralyzed by a war that no one wants, unable to change what matters most.

Last week, this story reached a climax of sorts, with developments like these:

**War Cost.** With new budget requests, the Iraq war price tag jumped over the $600 billion mark - enough, extrapolating from figures of the National Priorities Project, to add 9 million teachers to public schools for a year. Where would American education be if that happened instead? And where Iraq?

**Mercenaries.** We learned that the United States government has surrendered to "private contractor" hit squads the primal function of protecting its own diplomats in Iraq. Such unaccountable and profit-driven forces betray the foundational American military ethic. Hessians at last.

**Abolition.** Barack Obama made a major speech calling for a return to the long-abandoned goal of nuclear elimination. "We need to change our nuclear policy and our posture, which is still focused on deterring the Soviet Union - a country that doesn't exist." The major news media ignored this important declaration, obsessing instead with horse-race polls and fund-raising totals. Nuclear reform (antidote to proliferation and terrorism both) is not a campaign issue.

**Torture.** The Bush administration was revealed to have again secretly approved "enhanced" interrogation methods at restored CIA "black sites," where prisoners are once more held without treaty protections - measures that Congress and the Supreme Court have already rejected. Despite scandals, US torture continues.

These developments would be disturbing enough, but what they point to is an interruption in this nation's most important public tradition - the movement from recognition of a problem to its attempted resolution. From ill treatment of native peoples, to enslavement of Africans, to temptations to empire, to a religious embrace of violence, to Red Scare paranoia, to an insane arms race - we Americans have had our failings. But we have faced them. The capacity for self-criticism and change has defined our history. But that is not happening today. We are in an arms race with ourselves, and will not stop. Our unjust war is just unending. Our politics and media, meanwhile, form a feedback loop of banality. "Freedom" has become our prison.

Does all of this reveal a deeper flaw in our moral narrative itself? After all, we say today that our story began with Columbus. But what about the ones who welcomed him?

**James Carroll's** column appears regularly in the Globe.