

# After Iraq

## The Road from Baghdad

**A** fifth-generation raisin farmer in California's fertile Central Valley, VICTOR DAVIS HANSON is also a renowned historian of ancient Greece. Currently professor of classical studies at the University of California, Fresno, and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute, Stanford University, his books include *The Western Way of War* (1989), *The Other Greeks* (1995), *Carnage and Culture* (2001), a *New York Times* bestseller, and *An Autumn of War* (2002), reportedly a favourite of US Vice President Dick Cheney.

Well-known outside his academic milieu for his portrait of the vanishing small farmer in *Fields Without Dreams* (1996) and *The Land Was Everything* (2000), and his lament over the demise of classical learning and the humanities in *Who Killed Homer?* (1998), Dr Hanson is also a prolific contributor to conservative opinion magazines and a weekly columnist for *National Review Online*.

In an exclusive interview for *Policy*, he spoke with leading Australian historian GEOFFREY BLAINEY about whether America can remain the world's pre-eminent power, what is at stake in the war on terrorism and the high level of goodwill between Australia and the United States.



**Geoffrey Blainey** is Emeritus Professor at Melbourne University. He has written 32 books including *The Rush That Never Ended* (1963), *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966), *The Causes of War* (1973) and *A Short History of the World* (2000).

**Geoffrey Blainey:** Let's start with the big question. Do you think the United States will remain the No.1 power for a long period?

**Victor Davis Hanson:** I think for the foreseeable future, yes. If you look at its economic strength, its demography and political stability, the long-term signs are much more encouraging than, say, Europe, or Russia or Japan. It's a matter of translating values from a post-industrial, post-heroic society to a new generation. We're not an agrarian republic any more. But as long as we adhere to the constitution—and we have a wonderful constitution—I think we'll be OK.

**GB:** You have a classical studies background. One of the lessons, as I see it, of classical civilisations is that they rise and fall. You would bring that knowledge to your predictions about the United States.

**VDH:** I would. The Romans had this word, *luxus*, which I guess would translate as license. It was used to express the idea that the danger to a civilisation that is sophisticated and that has conquered the age-old challenges of feeding people, and of keeping them sheltered and protected, has always been overabundance of wealth, and how you inculcate to an affluent suburban youth principles of an agrarian virtue, muscularism, patriotism, family values—

**GB:**—and civic duty—

**VDH:** Absolutely, civic duty. We have a large group of several million people in our media, government, and universities who have the privilege and the luxury to almost make fun of, indeed, trash or

criticise, the very culture that gave them so much abundance.

**GB:** Do you think the Roman empire decayed from within or from outside pressures?

**VDH:** It was a matter of decay from within. The enemies that Rome faced in 450 A.D. were no more formidable than those they faced in 215 B.C. But it was hard by the 5th century to convince 50 million people that they had a common identity and that it was worth dying for, fighting for or sacrificing for what it was to be Roman. Romanity had evolved to more of a lifestyle. And we don't know what the role of early Christianity was in the decline, but it was pacifist in its initial manifestations.

**GB:** If the United States eventually declines, do you think it will decline more from within than from pressure by outside enemies?

**VDH:** I think more from within. The problem is, for example, that we have 10-20 million illegal aliens in the south-western United States. How do you assimilate those without education, the English language or proper immigration papers when you have so many people tugging at their hearts and minds to establish a separate Chicano identity? There are very few people in the United States who have the courage to say that Mexicans who are here should adopt our culture, for both their own and our self-interest. To say so in today's hypersensitive, politically correct society is very difficult. That's what I'm worried about—this suppression of debate and self-censorship. Other than that, I remain pretty optimistic.

## September 11: the Awakening

**GB:** Nearly two years after the attacks on the World Trade Center, do you see that as one of the really significant events of the last 50 years?

**VDH:** I think it was a seminal event because for Americans, all of their cherished ideas that had come into vogue were shattered. Multiculturalism as it was being taught suggested that no one culture could privilege itself over another. But the more



Victor Davis Hanson and Geoffrey Blainey

we got to know about the Taliban or al-Qaeda the more we realised that we have not seen people like them since the medieval period.

There was also this idea of utopian pacifism from the Enlightenment—that the only problem left in history was educating people who would then all act rationally. We discovered that we weren't at the 'end of history', that people who value honour, or status, or nationality, or religious zealotry, wanted to kill us for who we are, not what we did. And then there was this pernicious idea of moral equivalence. It was the same thing, some said, to be killed in peace in the World Trade Center than it was for us to bomb the Taliban at war in Afghanistan. That concept has been shattered as well. So we went back to an appreciation of 19th century or classical values because when you have a crater in downtown Manhattan and two kilotonnes worth of explosive power and 3,000 dead, it makes an impression and questions received wisdom.

**GB:** So you see the big symbolism of September 11 in the need to redefine America's future and America's sense of identity?

**VDH:** Yes. It reminded everybody that the American society of the 1990s had been self-absorbed and ignorant of the world about it. Certain ideas such as the 'end of history' suggested that our security, affluence and freedom would only increase ad infinitum. September 11 reminded us that if we didn't go back to our old values of community, self-sacrifice, hard work, scepticism, and the tragic view of humankind rather than this pernicious new therapeutic view, we would have a series of perpetual crises in a world that viewed us as weak, decadent, and unwilling to sacrifice.

**GB:** Are you implying that the United States in the 1990s was fairly isolationist?

**VDH:** It wasn't so much that we were isolationist because there were actually more US troops involved abroad in the 1990s, albeit in small numbers, than anytime in American history. They were, after all, in Somalia, the Balkans, the Middle East and other places. But they were working in a multilateral context for humanitarian missions. The idea that the United States itself might have to fight with very

few allies for the very principles that many in the world either would not accept or would not want to go along with was a new concept for us, one not seen since the old alliance of World War II.

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**GB:** At the same time, while the United States plays a global role of various kinds, isolationist opinions remain very influential within American society.

**VDH:** That's because, like you, we're such a big, isolated near-continent sized state. A residual isolationism is always just beneath the surface in the United States, given our history as well. True, in the past months, we've proven that we're not totally multilateral anymore in terms of old alliances. That's gone. But we're not totally isolationist either. It's more a question of muscular independence and creating coalitions of the willing. We're trying to get away from this idea of having 80,000 American troops in Germany, or 20,000 in Turkey, or 10,000 in Saudi Arabia. We're asking ourselves existential questions: What is a base? What is an ally? Do we want to have the same old relations with the United Nations? Everything's on the table for discussion.

At the same time, there's a renewed commitment to places like Eastern Europe, Australia, India, and Britain. It's stunning how much goodwill there is towards Britain and Australia, but not necessarily for Canada and New Zealand. It goes deeper than just historical ties or the English language. It has more to do with the idea that certain countries have not become postmodern yet. They're still muscular, they still have values and see the world as still a dangerous and tragic place. We in America don't necessarily always care what the exact material contribution of those countries is. It's got more to do with a shared kindred spirit.

If you think about it for a minute, the 3rd largest economy in the world is Germany, and the 5th is France. Their leaders would not be able to go to the ranch in Texas or to the White House, yet your Prime Minister was courted like a celebrity in the United States based on his principles and wisdom. In my 49 years, I can't think of a period when Americans have been more aware of Australia, and more supportive. So you also have this engine of public opinion that's driving official policy that is increasingly pro-Australian.

**GB:** If Australia has an election and a Labor government comes into power, and the Labor government differs from the current Liberal government (though many complain the parties are too similar), that would affect the new relationship.

**VDH:** Yes, it would. We ask ourselves that question a lot. What if you had a Labor government, or we in turn had a liberal Democrat government in the United States? Obviously it would change some things, but there's still this reservoir of goodwill that might transcend it. If you had a Labor government in Australia that gratuitously tried to offend the United States in the way that Chrétien and the Canadians have in calling Mr Bush a moron, or in the way that New Zealand has tried unnecessarily to provoke Americans, then we would have problems; so often in the United States after 9/11 we don't act in a rational, predictable manner but put great value in symbolic capital. We put so much currency on goodwill, friendship and expressions of solidarity that we are almost hyper-sensitive. That bothers the Europeans because they assumed that they could continue to express invective against the United States and that we wouldn't really object. They

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were shocked and surprised when we did—and will in the future.

### Continental divides

**GB:** On the relations between Germany and the United States, do you think they've been altered for the next ten years?

**VDH:** At least. It's likely the Administration is going to forgive Russia, ignore Germany and punish France. The problem is that Mr Schröder ran a whole election on anti-Americanism. So we're taking most of our troops out of Germany and in five years there may only be a skeleton force. Americans have no interest in defending the Germans whatsoever. They are rich and large and can take care of themselves.

**GB:** So in the foreseeable future there'll be no American aircraft, no US troops?

**VDH:** We may use the Ramstein Air Force base for communications and transportation, but the idea that there's going to be conventional troops in Germany to protect Germany from somebody or to keep Germany in its place vis-à-vis France has been shattered. The Germans don't quite know this yet. They keep assuring us that they're our friends, but when you look at public opinion, one-third of German youth believes that we were in some way responsible for 9/11, so you see that the problem is elemental.

**GB:** In the event of a new party winning power at the next German election, do you believe that the position is likely to be altered substantially?

**VDH:** I don't think so, because they're going to be hampered by public opinion too. If you had a more conservative prime minister who assured the German people that the United States was their traditional friend and ally, I think he would find that too politically vulnerable. Public opinion in both countries is so estranged that it hampers what the politicians can do; they are constrained.

It's an historic rift between Europe and the United States. The distance was always there—look

at the 20th century and the European embrace of murderous utopianism, left and right. In some ways American society is a refutation of Europe. It's a meritocracy, or rather a plutocracy. It's not a society based on ancestry or birth. It's a much more radically confident, optimistic, reckless society than the one that's appeared in Europe—especially after the advent of this nightmarish European Union and its anti-democratic charter.

**GB:** And relations between the United States and France will not be repaired for a long time?

**VDH:** I don't see how. I wish I could see a way how. We wouldn't have minded if France had opposed us or abstained in the UN over Iraq, but it was pretty clear that they actively campaigned against us and tried to derail what we were doing and acted in a much more hostile way than, say, China did. So if they want to be belligerent towards the United States there is going to be ramifications. They have a zero reservoir of goodwill in America.

**GB:** Do you think French opinion and the French government are influenced by their large Islamic population?

**VDH:** I don't know. We keep hearing that they pander to this unassimilated Islamic group. We have many Muslims in the United States, but the difference is that they intermarry and they're assimilated much more quickly, and united by our popular culture. What we're worried about in the



Victor Davis Hanson

United States is this rising anti-Semitism in France that we keep hearing about. We feel they and other European states have a special burden to behave in that regard. When they revert to some of the things that happened in the 1930s, it makes us shudder.

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**GB:** The proportion of the Islamic population in France is much higher than the proportion of the Islamic population in the United States. Presumably, it's more ghettoised and that has electoral effects.

**VDH:** Yes, and that's been a very valuable lesson for us. We have a large Mexican population in the Southwest and they've been assimilated well in the past. But now there's 10-20 million of them here illegally and people are saying, do we really want to create a Marseilles in the United States? We're worried about that. We also feel that with declining European birth rates and rising immigration from the Islamic world, Europe has a reckoning coming. We're waiting to see what's going to happen, but it's not going to be pretty. Something about socialism enervates the populace and feeds very unrealistic, and often dangerous ideas.

**GB:** You said earlier that the Administration is likely to ignore Germany, punish France and forgive Russia. Why the different treatment of Russia?

**VDH:** I'm always surprised at how much leeway the United States gives Russia. We were the enemy of communism, but it's pretty much endemic in American thinking now that the Russians themselves were victims of communism. Like the East Europeans, they are considered our friends and admired for their tenacity and ordeal. People will say that we never had a shooting war with the Russians and that they've been our allies in two big wars. Americans innately have no enmity at all towards Russia. Putin came to Bush's ranch and when he left you would have thought they were allies. For some reason we're much more willing to forgive Russia than France. Perhaps it's because we believe that Russia is a big, multi-racial country like us,

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and a rich country trying to become a democracy that looks to the future rather than whines about the past.

### Beyond Baghdad

**GB:** Back to the significance of September 11. Do you think that Afghanistan and Iraq will be followed by other United States raids, attacks or interventions?

**VDH:** Put it this way: I think that the American people and the Administration after Afghanistan and Iraq are saying, 'We've got about 40% of our active divisions overseas, and we're spending four billion dollars a month in Iraq, half a billion a month in Afghanistan. For how long can this go on?' At the same time, we're in a dilemma. There's never going to be peace in the world as long as you have countries that support terror like Iran and Syria. Until 9/11, more Americans had been killed by Iranian-sponsored terrorism of Hezbollah than al-Qaeda. So we know this sore has to be lanced. We're hoping that we get a second wind and some help abroad by natural forces—internal dissent within Iran, for example, would be very favourable to America and might negate the need to confront them militarily. We'll see; it's a disaster on the horizon because Iran may be two years away from a nuclear weapon and it could be pointed at Israel or at Europe—or at us.

**GB:** Do you think North Korea became more aggressive largely because America was temporarily diverted by Iraq?

**VDH:** Yes. And I also think that we in America bear a heavy burden of responsibility for the policies of the past 10 years. We thought that we could supply nuclear reactors or fuel oil or food to North Korea and we encouraged Japan likewise to write big cheques to them even while they were proliferating nuclear material. That not only emboldened the regime that deprecates magnanimity, but also set a precedent that perhaps states like Pakistan or Iran should get nuclear weapons so that they can then bribe Western countries—and avoid the lightning strikes of the US military that they saw in the last two years. That policy has been shown to be bankrupt. So we're trying to find ways to backtrack without loss of face.

The South Koreans have been triangulating with us as well. Their elites have rewritten their history to suggest that we were perhaps responsible for the Korean War even as a half century later we have some 38,000 Americans there being held hostage by the threat of invasion from North Korea. We don't quite know how to handle that but I think we're moving in the right direction by beginning to redeploy our troops to the south. We can be right behind them in support, rather than right out in front while being blamed, when the shooting starts.

**GB:** What was the reason for the United States being so sympathetic or tolerant?

**VDH:** During the Clinton Administration there was a great amount of wealth created in the 1990s and a lot of social experimentation that was the dividend of an increasingly tolerant, liberal lifestyle, combined with a sense that the entire world, driven by popular American culture, was coming to the 'end of history'. It was thought that people like a Korean dictator or Castro would almost erode naturally, or that countries like North Korea or Cuba would collapse through their fossilised ideology just like Eastern Europe. There was a lot of such naivety coupled with a sort of classical decadence and easy appeasement.

Fortunately, after 9/11 we woke up, but we still have a lot of catching up to do. Much of the criticism about Mr Bush as an extremist is a little unfair. He's bringing us back to the centre. We were so far off the scale in our delusions

and self-indulgence that he now seems a radical in his policies, when in fact in some ways he's a conservative and a moderate simply returning America to a sane nation that seeks to contribute to world calm and commerce.

**GB:** It was not only the United States in the 1990s that held the view that maybe the world had changed forever. The view was widely held in Australia, in many intellectual circles, that the world would never have a major war again.

**VDH:** I would rather trust Heraclitus who said that war is the father of us all, and Plato who said that peace was the real parenthesis. I don't like the Hobbesian view of human nature, but I've seen on my own farm—with neighbours, friends and enemies—the propensity of certain people to take advantage of magnanimity and consider it weakness, and try to destroy or hurt the innocent. Everyone who's civilised has a responsibility to be eternally vigilant to protect innocent people who lack power and will be targeted for their humanity. Every time somebody talks about the 'end of history', some one million Rwandans get killed while the world looks on and passes motions. Or every time the Europeans talk about their own moral superiority, 250,000 Balkan people get killed as they legislate. I'm very sceptical of these utopians because they have a lot of blood on their hands.

**GB:** With all respect, the phrase the 'end of history' is an astonishing phrase to gain circulation, no matter what its real meaning is, because the public can only see it as meaning that the world has changed forever.

**VDH:** I think Fukuyama may have been partially right in the long run—that the combination of consumer capitalism, freedom and personal individualism under consensual government is the only alternative to organising society. But how far away is that consensus? Is it a decade? A century? Is it five centuries until people like Mohammed Atta or Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein get on board? In the meantime, democracy is not going to sprout like a flower everywhere after rain, especially with predators aplenty.

**GB:** Do you think that in 100 years time democracy will be the mode of government in the overwhelming majority of the world's countries, or do you think that's very unlikely?

**VDH:** A lot of the anger towards the West in the Middle East is because of the very success of our system. They profess such a hatred for it as it spreads. If you just do a cursory investigation of what they do rather than what they say (seeking us out through immigration, importation, and emulation), this hatred surely is based on envy. And the Islamicists are parasitic on the West. But wiser people there do want democracy; they know al-Qaeda and the Taliban lead to the Inquisition and the Dark Ages.

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**GB:** Democracy is not exactly an easy system of government to operate.

**VDH:** No, democracy is only as good and bad as the people that participate in it. It's usually an epiphenomenon of a larger trend towards a market economy, the creation of a middle class, a sense of secularism and an embrace of rationalism, the rule of law and private property. Without these precursors, then you'll have just one election, one time as we saw in the Middle East with Mr Arafat or as the British learned in Africa. If the people don't adhere to liberal values, then the majority vote is not going to bring about those liberal values but simply reflect the moral poverty of a society.

**GB:** On the Islamic terrorists—if in the next ten years they have, say every 12 or 18 months, a dramatic success, do you think this will have a profound effect on international relations?

**VDH:** What's happened in the Arab world is that there's a large underclass of impoverished people who are victims of failed states, whether they are

Iraq or Libya or Syria or Iran. They're watching to see with which side they should align themselves. They know that Western capitalism and democracy, as we see it starting to happen in Turkey, offers the best chance of a better life. But it casts doubt on all their emotional idols and cherished ideas of Islam—the sexual apartheid of women, the patriarchy that tells people who you can marry and what you can do, odious things like cliterectomies, beheadings, and so on. So they're watching to see which way to go, and not to be too far ahead of the curve, when a mullah or punk with an AK-47 is always around the corner.

Bin Laden said it best when he said that nobody wants to ride a weak horse. He felt that he was the strong horse and we were the weak pony. So it's a cumulative process of gaining the upper edge to win hearts and minds. The better we do—getting rid of the Taliban, getting rid of Saddam Hussein, establishing our humane credentials—the more the people on the sidelines will want to join us. When we have a setback like 9/11, or if we should lose heart and withdraw from Iraq, the neutrals will want to ride a stronger horse.

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### On writing

**GB:** What's your next book?

**VDH:** I have a book that came out in June called *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*. It's about this new possible culture in California that's not quite American and not quite Mexican, and it's also a classical call to end it and to go back to legal, measured immigration—to let the powers of popular culture, intermarriage and assimilation work as they did in the past to create a melting pot, not a salad bowl.

**GB:** What was the reaction to it?

**VDH:** There was broad popular support, but a lot of criticism from what I would call members of the race industry who benefit from the misery of others. In California we have a large number of people who are racial separatists and want an unassimilated constituency that would require somebody like themselves to represent it in perpetuity. La Raza, their banner, is philologically and ideologically no different from Das Volk, so it is a scary concept.

I also have a book called *Ripples of Battle* that came out in September. It's an argument for the primacy of military history. The idea that war is passé is crazy. As an example of that thesis I look at three battles: Okinawa, Shiloh and a battle of antiquity, Delium (424 B.C.) I try to show that just in a matter of hours in those battles, many of the novels, much of the philosophy, art, tragedy, popular culture that we still appreciate, arose out of those catalysts so to speak. In other words, like a Herodotus or Thucydides, I'm trying to argue that all history is not equal. When men get on the battlefield and try to kill each other it's a seminal experience for those who endured it, and it has ramifications for centuries. I almost try to chart each cultural ripple that emanated out from those terrible splashes.

I'll give an example. *Ben Hur* was the bestselling book in the United States until *Gone With the Wind*. It was published around 1880, and it turns out it was written by a Northern general, Lew Wallace, who was furious and hurt because he was, I think quite wrongly, blamed for the first bad day in the Battle of Shiloh by General Grant. So he spent his entire life trying to recover his reputation and one of the ways he did so was by creating a Jewish heroic character, Ben Hur, like himself, a talented man wronged by an accident. The novel is a metaphor for Wallace's post-Shiloh life. So I look at things like that and I try to show that some of civilisation's most important phenomena, not just in the United States but in the world at large, can emerge from these experiences of a day or two.

**GB:** I've enjoyed talking with you. Good luck with your next ten books!