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World Views Clash in 'Imperial' Debate Grand Rapids Press, September 15, 2005

By Steve Harmon

GRAND RAPIDS -- For Arianna Huffington, it all adds up to imperialism: the "hubris and incompetence" of the Bush administration's war in Iraq, the failure of the Democratic Party to provide an opposition voice, and the media's inability to speak "truth to power."

There is nothing imperial in America's DNA, said Victor David Hanson.

This clash of world views collided in a passionate show of brainpower Wednesday before about 500 people at DeVos Place. It kicked off the "War and Empire" series of lectures sponsored by Grand Valley State University's Ralph Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies and the Gerald R. Ford Museum.

An imperial power wouldn't have a popular culture that is so critical of its own country, said Hanson, a conservative author of the classics and frequent contributor to the National Review online magazine.

"We don't have an imperial culture, we don't have imperial literature," he said. "After 9/11, we had literati that was quite critical even in our most difficult hour."

Empires take peoples' territory, something the United States hasn't done since 1898 in the Philippines, Hanson said.

"We're pulling out everywhere," he said. "We lost a lot of Americans in Okinawa, and we gave it back to Japan, willingly. That's not a trait of an imperial power."

Hanson views America's military forays as benign.

"Look at what the U.S. military has done," he said. "We've closed bases in Saudi Arabia and Germany, and we're reducing our role in Korea. We went to Grenada and took out a totalitarian dictator and left a democracy. That's not what empires do."

The neo-cons always wanted war in Iraq to "get control of the oil," Huffington said, "and 9/11 became a way to convince the American public we had a justification and reason to go in."

The lies that led to the public's acceptance of war -- linking Saddam Hussein to 9/11, warning about weapons of mass destruction that Saddam was supposed to have -- were a measure of an empire, said Huffington, a liberal commentator with her own online magazine, the Huffington Post.

Another sign of imperialism was the cronyism that became evident in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Huffington said, referring to Michael Brown, the former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency criticized for his response to the disaster.

"Accountability is at the heart of a functioning republic," Huffington said. "The essence of an empire is the combination of hubris and incompetence. We may not have imperialist literature, but we do have an enormous amount of spin, the equivalent of the great imperial poets."

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