

Clash of Civilizations?

Are we to accept Huntington's reading-of September 11 as an attack on the West, and part of an unfolding, or yet to begin, war between Islam and the West?

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In the weeks after the September 11 attacks, and the instant US declaration of a global war against all countries that harbor terrorists-a list populated by Muslim countries-it appeared that the 'clash of civilizations' predicted by Samuel Huntington was underway, or just around the corner.

The clash of war rhetoric was deafening-aimed at resurrecting atavistic passions. Instantly, President Bush began casting the attacks in a Manichaeian mould. Osama and his evil cohorts had declared a war against 'all civilized countries'--long a code for the West--and *they* would get the 'crusade' that they wanted. Osama saw the world with equal clarity, divided into two warring camps-of believers and infidels. The millennial war between the West and Islam was about to be joined. Or so it seemed.

September 11 will remain a day inscribed in infamy. But does it mark the first strike in a clash of civilizations-predicted by our sage political scientist? Samuel Huntington prevaricates, but he sticks to his guns. In an inter-view, he declared that the attacks "were not a clash of civilizations but a blow by a fanatical group on civilized societies in general." So, it is *not* an attack on United States, or its policies, but an attack on the West-on "civilized societies in general."

But if this is not *the* clash, it will come in due time. In his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington insists that our problem is not Islamic fundamentalism. "It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." On the other hand, the problem for Islam is not US policies: it is the West, whose people are "convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world." The clash is inevitable.

Are we to accept Huntington's reading-of September 11 as an attack on the West, and part of an unfolding, or yet to begin, war between Islam and the West? I will show that if we eschew Bacon's 'idols' of the tribe and the market, and stay with the facts-some quite elementary facts-these theses become indefensible.

First, consider the attacks of September 11, and place them alongside other attacks of a similar nature-of which they are an escalation. If we examine the history of such attacks-starting with the 1983 attacks on US interests in Lebanon, winding through more attacks on US embassies, military facilities, officials and citizens in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Britain, Germany, Tanzania and Kenya, leading up to the culminating attacks of September 2001-we have to face two unpleasant facts.

In nearly all cases, the target of these attacks was unmistakably the United States. It is also the case that in nearly every case, these attacks were carried out by Arabs, on Arab soil at first, but moving up to attacks in non-Arab countries, and, eventually, to attacks on US soil. In the 1980s, the attackers were mostly Lebanese and Palestinians. Later, they were to be joined by Egyptians and Saudis.

What is the significance of these facts? First, they establish that the attackers were not waging war against "all civilized societies in general", but against *one* in particular-United States-with less than one-sixth of the population of the West. Theirs is not a war against the West, or the free-dom, democracy, and pluralism of Western societies. It is also worth noting that the attacks were directed mostly against military and officials targets. The exceptions are the Lockerbie crash and the two attacks on WTC. Equally important, nearly all the attackers were of Arab ethnicity; they have included few Pakistanis, Turks, Bangladeshis, Indonesians,

Malays, Nigerians, Iranians, or Afghans.

On two counts, then, we must reject the Huntington reading of the attacks of September 11. This and similar attacks have had a specific target, viz. United States. Secondly, even if we regard the attackers as representative of Arab societies—a highly questionable assumption—this only pits one-sixth of Islam against less one-sixth of the West. Not exactly a clash between two civilizations.

Why then has the United States framed this conflict in terms of universals—as an attack on the West, on civilization itself? This language is well-chosen. It serves a variety of goals. And looking into these goals can bring important insights into our Middle East policies and how they may be connected to the attacks leading up to September 11.

Most importantly, perhaps, this rhetoric deflects attention from concerns—which must be suppressed—that the death of 3,300 Americans was 'collateral damage' of our policies in the Middle East: our unflinching support of Israeli expansionism, the backing we have given to an assortment of corrupt and repressive dictatorships and oil potentates, and, not least, a policy of sanctions against Iraq that kills 5000 Iraqi children every month.

The language of an attack on "all civilized societies"—even as we avow our peaceful intentions towards Islam—evokes images of an attack by Islam against the West. It turns the focus away from the reality of an attack by a handful of men who have turned to extreme methods to redress real grievances. This has boosted the President's approval ratings to the mid-eighties, giving him a free hand in waging war, curtailing liberties, and battering corporations.

This rhetoric helps to globalize our war against 'terror'. If September 11 can be sold as an attack on "all civilized societies"—read, all Christendom—we can count on the atavistic passions this will arouse to bring Europe closer to the American position. But, as we talk of extending the war beyond Afghanistan, to Sudan, Somalia and Iraq, the Europeans are beginning to break rank. Even Britain, our trusted ally, has been showing signs of nervousness.

None of this, however, implies that we *cannot* turn September 11 into a greater tragedy than it already is. It is tempting to leverage this event—wittingly or otherwise—into the clash that Huntington predicts. We can do this by holding on to bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan, by pushing the war beyond Afghanistan, or by persecuting our Muslim minorities and eventually forcing their exodus. The Islamic world will be watching what we do—more than they will be listening to what we say. As Americans—and world citizens—we should do everything we can to stop this human tragedy from turning into a disaster for humankind.

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