

Is This a Clash of Civilizations?

By M. SHAHID ALAM

On September 11, 2001, when the nineteen Arab hijackers from Al-Qaida struck the most visible icons of America's military and financial power--the Pentagon and the Twin Towers--there were more than a few pundits who concluded with some satisfaction that the "clash of civilizations" they had been predicting had finally arrived.

The concept of a "clash of civilizations" was first drafted in 1990 by Bernard Lewis, a committed Zionist, to describe the conflict between political Islam and the West. "This is no less than a clash of civilization--the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both." Unable to adapt to modernity and secularism, Islamic societies had rejected Western values and were now transforming Islam into a militant movement against the West.

A few years later, in 1993, Samuel Huntington, elevated the thesis of a clash of civilizations into a universal historical principle. Civilizations are the largest human aggregates that command human loyalties; and conflicts between civilizations account for much of the bloodshed in recorded human history. The Cold War marked a brief departure from this principle, but now that this aberrant period was happily over, civilizations could go back to their old pastime--waging wars against each other. In this new era, Huntington predicted, the most serious challenge to the West's hegemony would come from Islam and China.

The Huntington thesis was an instant success that is not hard to explain. The military establishment seized it as a suitable replacement for the loss of the Soviet threat. If Islam and China could be inflated into worthy enemies, they could save the military budget and NATO. Other substitutes--such as the drug cartels--were examined but they weren't worthy opponents of imperial United States. The thesis was manna to the Zionists, who had been working hard to convert their war against the Palestinians into an American war against Islam. It gave comfort to right-wing Christian zealots who see Islam as the chief adversary in their war to win souls for Christ.

And so when Osama's men struck, it instantly produced demands for a "civilizational war" against Islam. Not surprisingly, the Zionist voices were the most insistent and articulate. Within a few hours of the terrorist strikes, I had seen every current and former Israeli leader on the major US networks, not counting less eminent Israeli representatives, all of whom were urging United States to carry the war against Islamic terrorists to their home ground--in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Libya and Pakistan. It was no time to mince words. The United States and Israel now had the same enemies. They were fighting the same war.

The call to arms was loud and clear. Writing on October 29, 2001, in *The Weekly Standard*, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, strong supporters of Israel, were predicting that Afghanistan will only be an "opening battle" in a long war that will "spread and engulf a number of countries in conflicts of varying intensity." More ominously, they declared, this war "is going to resemble the clash of civilizations everyone had hoped to

avoid." Other pro-Israelis were more direct. Norman Podhoretz, editor of the *Commentary*, a leading Zionist monthly, was urging the United States to be ready to "fight World War IV--the war against militant Islam," and to "impose a new political culture on the defeated parties." There was an air of triumphalism in Zionist pronouncements.

It is a testimony to the power of the pro-war lobbies that the Bush administration lost little time in embracing their plans for a civilizational war against Islam. After a quick but illusory victory over the ragtag Taliban regime in Afghanistan, United States moved quickly to convert the campaign against terrorism--a campaign in which it has received the cooperation of nearly every Muslim country--into a war against countries that oppose Israel's hegemony over the Middle East. President Bush's embrace of Likudnik policies was complete when Ariel Sharon, admonished by his own Courts for complicity in the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatilla, was declared to be a "man of peace."

Is America's intimate embrace of Likudnik policies, its ongoing war against Afghanistan, its impending war against Iraq, and projected wars against Iran, Syria and Pakistan, proof that the clash of civilizations has begun? Hardly. This only demonstrates the power of the lobbies that have been planning, predicting and promoting the "clash" against Islam. They were predicting what they were planning to carry out in due time. The attacks of September 11, 2001 only advanced their war plans.

The sharpest refutation of the Huntington thesis comes from the West itself. A growing chorus of Western voices now proclaims that the war against Iraq is not *their* war. In poll after poll, they have been asserting that this is not a just war, that Iraq does not pose an imminent or mortal threat to their security, that United States constitutes a greater threat to world peace than Iraq or South Korea. They know that Iraqis are mostly Muslims, but that has not stopped them from recognizing their common humanity; this has not diminished their outrage over economic sanctions that have killed half a million Iraqi children. There are many in the West now who feel that *they* have more in common with the oppressed Iraqis than they do with Bush and Blair, or the warmongers that control and use them. Perhaps for the first time, the imperialist warlords have failed to use religion to divide mankind.

The partisans of war claim that Islam is evil, it preaches terror and hatred, and it must be destroyed before it destroys us. It is a tribute to the moral clarity of so many in the West that they are not buying into this Manichean duality that apportions all virtue to one's own tribe and all evil to one's adversary. Most remarkably, it is the Christian leaders in the West who have valiantly rejected this Manichean vision, and who now stand tall in their opposition to the war against Iraq. They are challenging the bigotry of Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells. Even Bush's own Methodist Church has declared that the war against Iraq is "without any justification according to the teachings of Christ."

If the thesis of an inevitable clash between the West and Islam still had any semblance of credibility, it was shredded by the global anti-war rallies of February 15, 2003. It is estimated that some 30 million people joined these rallies in more than 600 cities across

the world. Significantly, the most massive of these rallies were staged in the capitals, cities and towns of Western countries. It was Westerners who took the lead, while braving freezing sub-zero temperatures, to tell their governments that they did not want this war against Iraq. These demonstrations were most massive in countries--such as Britain, Spain, Italy, Australia and United States--whose governments supported the war.

The war-mongering Bush-Blair team may still go ahead with the war, disregarding the clear democratic verdict of their own people. But so massive a rejection of war cannot be ignored without consequences; and by this I mean not just consequences for the personal careers of Bush and Blair. When the voice of the people is so blatantly flouted, it will undermine the illusion so sedulously cultivated of democratic societies that pay heed to the will of the people. In one instant, the charade of democracy, of a free press, of governments following the will of the people will have been tested and shown to be hollow.

But I also read a deeper, more hopeful message in the massive rallies of February 15. In the past, the great powers have nearly always succeeded in manipulating their citizenry into supporting their overseas adventures, even when these have destroyed millions of lives. However, I can sense the stirrings of a new consciousness amongst the privileged sections of the world's populations, an awareness that their privilege contributes to the misery of so many across the world, that our *global* apartheid cannot endure without destroying everyone.

It appears that they are beginning to understand that their privilege places a special burden on them: that they must act to restrain and rectify the rapacity of their own governments and corporations. At the least, they are now demonstrating that they will not permit their governments to murder in the name of the values that they cherish. Once before, slavery was abolished when its degradation became morally unacceptable to a growing number of people in slave-owning countries. Now for the first time, with the anti-war movement, the people of privilege are beginning to say that global apartheid is unconscionable.

We cannot doubt that these developments are causing alarm in the inner sanctums of the war-mongering parties. Even as world conscience shows signs of evolving towards a new post-tribal stage, we can be sure that plans are underway to reverse this. When the dominant cliques in the Core countries are frustrated in their hegemonic designs, they will not hesitate to shed their democratic façade. They will redouble their efforts to sow fear, raise alarm, breed mistrust, incite hatred. They will seek to curtail liberties in the name of national security. They will attempt to suppress dissent on the pretext of suppressing terrorism. Perhaps all this is already underway in United States. And only the coming days, weeks and months will reveal whether United States will follow the path of other capitalist democracies in trouble--and descend into fascism--or the forces of justice and democracy, true to the highest human ideals, will triumph over the dark forces that have held ascendancy over the fate of mankind.

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