

**Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*  
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)**

With the end of the Cold War, global politics entered a new era in which the concept of a clash of ideologies had become obsolete. Some, such as Francis Fukuyama, argued that this heralded the “end of history.” With communism dead, nothing would take its place and the world would gradually accept the rationality of Western ideas to become a global culture. Others foresaw a model driven by nation states. However, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Samuel Huntington argues for an alternative paradigm for understanding and predicting global politics. Rather than one global civilization, he maintains that the world is best seen consisting of seven or eight great civilizations, brought together by culture not ideology. Struggles for power and dominance between the major nations of these civilizations and along the borders between these civilizations would create the crisis points and the subsequent possibility of conflict. Only by recognizing these civilizations and the West’s relations to them in a period of relative decline of Western hegemony can the West hope to avoid conflict, war and collapse.

Huntington begins by examining the necessity of a new paradigm and by examining the existing alternatives. While acknowledging that such a map would be by its nature a generalization, he argues that pure objectivity is a delusion because of ingrained cultural biases. An “easily grasped and intelligible framework for understanding the world” is thus required to both comprehend and predict global events.<sup>1</sup> He rejects both the “nation-state” and the “anarchic” model as too specific, too detailed, unable to explain links between nation states and incapable of predicting patterns. Conversely, a “two-world” model is far too simple. He also rejects Fukuyama’s “universal civilization” as “divorced from reality.”<sup>2</sup> Expanding upon this in chapter four and five, he argues that culture is not

becoming universalized but rather, with a growth in cultural consciousness, differences are actually being reinforced. In fact, the current era is seeing a fading of the West. After centuries of domination, the West has lost its colonial territories, is losing its overwhelming position of domination of military and economic matters and its unable to enforce its cultural hegemony. Simultaneously, other civilizations are growing more literate, more numerous and more confident in their own strength and power, leading to religious revival and the growth in indigenization. Rejecting both the acceptance of Western consumer goods and of modernization as reliable indicators of acceptance of Western ideas, he maintains that the triumph of Western cultural ideas is fallacious, ethnocentric and hubristic. In particular, the Sinic and Islamic civilizations, with their growing assertiveness and belief in their own cultural superiority over the West, shatter the “universal civilization” model and foreshadow growing potential for conflict in the twenty first century.

The best alternative paradigm then is the multi-polar, multi-civilizational model in which culture defines each civilization. Culture is both a unifying and divisive force and one increasingly relevant with the demise of ideologies in the post-Cold War era and the rise in alienation and dislocation that accompanies modernization. As the peoples of the world seek new and relevant identities, they look increasing to their own ethnic, religious and cultural traditions for answers. A civilization, as Huntington defines it, is culture “writ large,” the broadest level of identification possible.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, however, although he mentions religion as a major factor in culture, Huntington does not fully explain or delineate the other possible factors that are important within a culture or a civilization. This makes his list of major civilizations – Western, Sinic (Chinese), Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox and possibly Latin American and African – appear somewhat random. Why, for example, is Korea

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

included in the Sinic civilization but not Japan? These generalizations also should lead the reader to question the place of intra-civilizational struggles within the global framework. Are fissures within “Western” or “Islamic” civilizations truly of little consequence, as Huntington seems to aver, or might they have global significance? To downplay the differences within civilizations not only dehumanizes the peoples of the world but also seems a dangerous blind spot in Huntington’s theory.

Describing and analyzing next the structure of civilizations, Huntington describes core, member, lone, cleft and torn states. Cleft states, such as Sudan, contain two or more civilizational groups within its borders, leading to internal tensions. Torn states are those like Turkey that have attempted to shift from one civilization to another – usually from non-Western to Western – provoking dissent. Conversely, core states are those powers around which other states of the same civilization coalesce such as the USA or China. As they are seen as “kin” to the other nations in their civilization, they can assume the position of maker and keeper of order that states not of the civilization cannot. They can, as his example of China demonstrates, also create economic, cultural and political unity. Huntington’s thesis assumes, however, that member states will cede such authority to their core state. This generalization may well hold some truth in many situations, but it is doubtful whether it is a truly accurate picture of global politics. European resistance to US-led foreign policy initiatives since 9/11, for instance, is surely a critical rejoinder to Huntington’s argument. He also maintains that the lack of core states – in Islamic, Latin American and African civilizations – creates an intrinsic weakness and a potential source of internal conflict as potential core states jockey for power. Yet, examining Islamic civilization, he argues for a unity of purpose – despite no core state – that threatens the West. According to Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” paradigm,

“The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization who people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with their inferiority of their power. The problem

for Islam [...] is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believes that their superior [...] power imposes upon them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world.”<sup>4</sup>

This conclusion certainly may appear to have been borne out by current events – and certainly many will agree with him – yet it generalizes Muslim and Western attitudes to such an extent that all potential for nuance is lost. Where, for instance, do states such as Turkey, a candidate nation for EU entry and supporter of the US, fall into this analysis?

Nevertheless, Huntington identifies the prospect of friction between core states of different civilizations as the greatest threat to global peace. If the West attempts to impose its ideals and civilization upon a confident China, for example, and attempts to retain hegemony of East Asia, it will increasingly risk escalation of that conflict into war. Fault line wars – those that occur between two different civilizations upon the borders between them – are another source of conflict. Although similar in nature to intra-civilizational “community” conflicts, their inter-civilizational equivalents are more likely to widen into greater wars, as kin groups involve themselves in the struggle. Certainly, some of the examples he cites such as the wars in the Balkans have come to involve wider participants, but most often in the role of mediators not combatants. Drawing attention to the prominent role of Muslims in such conflicts, Huntington characterizes Muslims as bellicose and having “problems living peaceably with their neighbors.”<sup>5</sup> He offers an explanation for the behavior and attitudes thus characterized in both historical and current terms. Yet, in this, his bias shows through. He dismisses the effect of colonization and subjugated status upon Muslims and argues that Muslims have historically been intolerant of other religions and cultures. The latter appears to be Orientalist mischaracterization at its worst. Indeed, medieval Islam was rather more tolerant of Christianity than *vice versa*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 256.

Despite this prejudice, Huntington argues that the West must understand other civilizations to prevent future global conflicts. It must recognize that its culture is not universal, attempt to maintain a balance of power rather than a complete hegemony and avoid interfering in intra-civilizational conflicts and fault lines wars involving non-Western civilizations. A policy of non-interference when Iraq invaded Kuwait would, he argues, have prevented anti-Western sentiment building in the Islamic world and the concomitant risks. That conclusion does not seem unreasonable. Yet, it would also have prevented NATO from stopping the genocide in Kosovo or Britain from halting a vicious civil war in Sierra Leone in 2000 and would also prevent anyone from taking action in Darfur. Huntington clearly believes that the risk to Western civilization is too great, whatever the cost to human life. This will surely seem a disturbing conclusion to many. So too, might Huntington's proposals for maintaining Western civilization. Despite the great inter-civilizational and even

intra-national cultural differences, he advocates the promotion of Christianity as the corner piece of Western civilization, the restriction of immigration and the rejection of multiculturalism. Without such measures, the West will fall into a morass of decay from which it will not be able to emerge.

While these conclusions might appear alarming, they fit the tone of this sobering work. Although the paradigm for which Huntington argues may appear too limited, with too much generalization and a tendency on the author's part to show prejudice, it is often well argued, does seem to explain many aspects of global politics and is always interesting. As such, it should not be taken as the final word on the subject, but rather as a useful and provocative starting point for discussions in the subject. It is thus valuable reading not only to political scientists and foreign policy specialists but also, in the volatile climate of current world affairs, to anyone seeking to better understand the dynamics and structures at work.