# Enemy Wanted: Apply Without

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/28/enemy-wanted-apply-without/

DAVID A. WELCH, MAY 28 2013

A friend of mine once told me a story about the seminar he attended at which Samuel Huntington first presented his nascent ideas about "the clash of civilizations." The Cold War had recently ended, much to everyone's surprise, and people were scrambling to figure out what world politics would look like next. Others had already staked their claims. John Mearsheimer had predicted a return to rough-and-tumble 1930s-style multipolarity.[1] Charles Krauthammer had proclaimed America's "unipolar moment."[2] Francis Fukuyama had foreseen the triumphal sweep of liberal democracy across the globe.[3] And President George H. W. Bush had trumpeted a "new world order" based on the rule of law and sound global governance.[4]

"Islam," said Huntington.

"What?" said the audience.

"Islam is the next enemy."

"Why?"

"Well—it just is. They hate us."

"What do you mean, 'It just is,' Sam? That's not a reason. You need some kind of theory to back that up."

"Fine. I'll be back."

And thus, according to my friend, was the "clash of civilizations" thesis born.

Now, I was not present in the room, so I cannot vouch for my friend's account. And in any case, he admitted that he was paraphrasing in his typically colorful way. But that was the gist, he said; the clash of civilizations thesis began with a hunch, and the theory came later.

Anyone who understands social science knows that it isn't supposed to work this way. We aren't supposed to start with our predictions and engineer theories to back them up. This isn't even supposed to be possible, epistemologically or psychologically. Our world views—which in the case of International Relations (IR) scholars includes specific kinds of theories—are supposed to shape our expectations. Mearsheimer and Krauthammer came to the debate primed by "realism;" they disagreed on how many "poles" the post-Cold War world would have, but they agreed that international politics was always and everywhere governed by *raison d'état.* Fukuyama brought to the table training in classics, comparative literature, and political philosophy, as well as a disposition to think in terms of grand teleological narratives; liberal democracy was for him what the Weberian Prussian state had been for Hegel. The first President Bush came to the White House with a generic predilection for mission and a latent Wilsonian streak;[5] freed of Cold War constraints, he relished the chance to indulge them.

What explained Huntington's prediction, though? He was known as a high-impact scholar of civil-military relations,[6] comparative political development,[7] and American politics.[8] While he had written extensively on U.S.

foreign and security policy, he had done so very much in a Cold War vein where the parameters were taken for granted. He was known to be a conservative Democrat, and people suspected him of being sympathetic to realism (though perhaps of a classical rather than "neo" kind)—but being a conservative Democrat would not generate any particular prediction about the post-Cold War world, and the fact that Huntington's prediction seemed so very different from Mearsheimer's or Krauthammer's seemed to call his realist credentials into question. What was going on?

The first iteration of the clash of civilizations thesis—Huntington's widely-read 1993 *Foreign Affairs* piece[9]—offered some potential answers to this question. Intriguingly, while not abandoning the realist claim that states are the most important actors in world affairs, he implied that realism had never really been enough:

For a century and a half after the emergence of the modern international system with the Peace of Westphalia, the conflicts of the Western world were largely among princes—emperors, absolute monarchs and constitutional monarchs attempting to expand their bureaucracies, their armies, their mercantilist economic strength and, most important, the territory they ruled. In the process they created nation states, and beginning with the French Revolution the principal lines of conflict were between nations rather than princes. In 1793, as R. R. Palmer put it, "The wars of kings were over; the wars of peoples had begun." This nineteenth-century pattern lasted until the end of World War I. Then, as a result of the Russian Revolution and the reaction against it, the conflict of nations yielded to the conflict of ideologies, first among communism, fascism-Nazism and liberal democracy, and then between communism and liberal democracy. During the Cold War, this latter conflict became embodied in the struggle between the two superpowers, neither of which was a nation state in the classical European sense and each of which defined its identity in terms of its ideology.[10]

Put another way, states did not have interests *qua* states; they were merely the vehicles through which political leaders pursued other kinds of objectives. Until the end of the Cold War, Huntington insisted (following William Lind), the main fault lines of world politics were fault lines within the Western world—in effect, "Western civil wars." Non-Westerners were either uninvolved, colonized, or bit players in Western dramas. But with the collapse of communism, there were no longer any significant cleavages within "the West." Capitalist liberal democracy had triumphed. "With the end of the Cold War," Huntington wrote, "international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its centerpiece becomes the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations."[11]

This was an intriguing idea, but a problematic one. Among the problems, as I and many others pointed out quickly enough, were the fact that it was impossible to define and deploy the concept of "civilization" rigorously, and even if one could, there was no reason to suspect that civilizational boundaries would all of a sudden become politically salient if they never had been so before.[12] There were perfectly good reasons why no one put Arnold Toynbee on his or her IR reading list.[13]

The second, longer version of Huntington's thesis—the 1996 book, which dropped the question mark from the original article's title[14]—only muddied the waters. Tensions and inconsistencies in his treatment of "civilizations" not only between the book and the article but within the book itself vindicated rather than rebutted his early critics. The entire effort had become self-refuting.

If the theory could not support the prediction, what could? For years, the question of what had motivated it fascinated and mystified me.

But in 2004, I finally understood. That was the year in which Huntington published his last major book,*Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity,* [15] in which he warned of the unwillingness of recent (primarily Hispanic) immigrants to embrace and assimilate into America's "Anglo-Protestant culture," unlike earlier waves of immigrants from elsewhere. I was leafing through a copy of *The New Yorker* one day, when I stumbled across a fascinating review of the book by Louis Menand—and that was when I had the eureka moment. In an almost off-the-cuff kind of way, Menand casually remarked: "Huntington's name for ideology is 'culture.'"[16]

That was it. Huntington was all about culture. He had defined civilization as the most general, abstract level of culture. "Western civil wars" were intracultural wars. And culture matters, more than anything else. "I think we all feel much more at home with people who have similar cultures, language and values than we do with other people," Huntington told Mark O'Keeffe in a revealing interview two years before he died.[17] Huntington had never really felt at home, and clearly he longed for it. The problem was that globalization was making it harder all the time. In 1993 he saw Islam as the great danger because "they hate us;" in 2004, he saw Hispanic immigration as the great danger because "they *aren't* us." It wasn't about the hate; it was about the *us*.

If civilizations were the main fault lines of international politics, "we" would just be "us"—at peace with ourselves in our own place, and everyone else in theirs. The clash of civilizations was not a prediction or a theory after all: it was a wish.

—

**David A. Welch** *is CIGI Chair of Global Security, Balsillie School of International Affairs. He has written extensively on foreign policy decision making and international security. His works include Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change, Justice and the Genesis of War, and, as co-author with Joseph Nye, Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History (9th edition).*

[1] John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990); John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic* 266, no. 2 (1990).

[2] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, (1990/1991).

[3] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[4] George H. W. Bush, "Address before a Joint Session of Congress (September 11, 1990)", Miller Center of Public Affairs http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3425 (accessed 21 May 2013).

[5] James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992), 456-483.

[6] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).

[7] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[8] Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

[9] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993).

[10] Ibid., 22-23.

[11] Ibid., 23.

[12] *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993); Albert L. Weeks, "Do Civilizations Hold?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (1993); Richard E. Rubenstein and Jarle Crocker, "Challenging Huntington," *Foreign Policy*, no. 96 (1994); Roy P. Mottahedeh, "Clash of Civilizations? An Islamicist's Critique," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 2, no. 2 (1995); Pierre Hassner, "Morally Objectionable, Politically Dangerous," *The National Interest*, no. 46 (1996); Michael J. Mazarr, "'The Clash of Civilizations?'," *The Washington Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1996); Stephen M. Walt, "Building up New Bogeymen," *Foreign Policy*, no. 106 (1997); David A. Welch, "The 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis as an Argument and as a Phenomenon," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (1997).

[13] Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

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

[15] Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

[16] Louis Menand, "Patriot Games: The New Nativism of Samuel P. Huntington," *The New Yorker*, 17 May 2004.

[17] "Five Years after 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations Revisited", The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Five-Years-After-911-The-Clash-of-Civilizations-Revisited.aspx.