

The American Conservative

Samuel Huntington Was Not Like Steve Bannon

Both emphasized the clashing of civilizations, but the similarities end there.

William S. Smith

May 2, 2017

The late Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" paradigm has been taking a beating lately. His critics have warned that such a worldview portends a millenarian war between the West and Islam.

One reason for the pile-on is that Huntington's theory has become associated with the views of Steve Bannon, who, as a call-in participant in a conference at the [Vatican in 2014](#), was thought to have echoed Huntington when he declared that the West is now "in an outright war against jihadist Islamic fascism."

As also discussed by *TAC*'s Noah Millman, [Stephen Walt of Harvard](#) has labeled Bannon's views "Huntingtonian" and argued that "seeing the future as a vast contest between abstract cultural groupings is a self-fulfilling prophecy: If we assume the adherents of different religions or cultural groups are our sworn enemies, we are likely to act in ways that will make that a reality." Cato's Emma Ashford recently wrote in *The National Interest*: "The incoming administration seems to have fully embraced the ideas of Harvard historian Samuel Huntington, not only on the clash of civilizations, but on American decline, the idea of a West encircled by enemies, and even on immigration."

But these commentators misunderstand the connection between Huntington's views and Bannon's. While Bannon does follow Huntington in seeing the world order as marked by civilizational clashes, the most prominent being the clash between Islam and the West, he has not adopted Huntington's remedies for these clashes. Huntington forcefully argued that the leaders of the great world civilizations must seek common ground; Bannon's focus is upon the clash itself.

These caricatures of Huntington's theory, both by Bannon himself and by his critics, represent a serious problem for U.S. foreign-policy analysis, as Huntington was largely correct in his diagnosis of the problem. The foreign-policy establishment has never recognized the truth in what Huntington wrote about the New World Order: "In the post-Cold War world, for the first time in history, global politics has become multipolar *and* multicivilizational ... the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural." By stigmatizing, discounting, or ignoring a cultural analysis of world events, the foreign-policy establishment has been able to retain a deeply flawed worldview that has plunged the United States into a series of fruitless and costly military interventions. These have been

motivated by what Robert Kagan called a “universalist ideology,” one with which he is in agreement, calling for exporting the values of the Declaration of Independence to all nations.

The catalytic event in this post-Cold War establishment foreign-policy consensus was the Gulf War, when the U.S. decided that Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait was an affront to these global values and could not stand. At the forefront was the rhetoric of a New World Order of universalist values enforced by the United States, but in the background was the reinstatement of a morally dubious regime in Kuwait by force of American arms, a subsequent massacre of Kurds by Saddam, and, most ominously, an endless and robust American military presence in the heart of Islamic civilization. President George H.W. Bush’s New World Order of liberal values and global institutions enforced by U.S. hegemony turned out to be a chimera as the cultural and ethnic enmities of the Middle East came to the fore.

The 2003 Iraq War was the crowning blunder of the establishment’s post-Cold War foreign policy. Marching under the banner of globalist democracy promotion and the need to cashier a supposedly rogue dictator, the U.S. initiated a destabilization of the entire Middle East, in effect delivering Iraq to Iran. It unleashed horrific sectarianism, wiped out ancient Christian communities, and helped to create a virulent terrorist cult that has spread throughout the Middle East and into Western Europe.

The Iraq War should have made clear that the greatest failure of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment in the post-Cold War period has been its inability to recognize that the world is increasingly organizing around civilizational categories and that the removal of rogue dictators in other civilizations does not midwife world order. The recent U.S. attack on the Assad regime willfully ignores the legacy of U.S. policy failures over decades.

Huntington’s view has been corroborated by a series of post-Cold War events that were, and continue to be, dominated by ethnic and cultural tensions. The civil strife in the Balkans, the division in Ukraine, Turkey’s increasing rejection of the West, the rampant civil wars in Africa, the rise of anti-immigrant parties in Europe, and even U.S. immigration politics all reflect a world in which peoples wish to ally themselves with those of a similar culture, including a similar religion and history. Civilizational clashes mark the New World Order as culturally alien nations and peoples no longer want to be forced together, either into artificially created nation-states or into alliances between alien civilizations. Most U.S. policymakers seem not to realize that the three main foreign-policy challenges of the U.S. have a prominent civilizational component: Islamic civilization wants the United States, and its culture, out of the Middle East with many groups resorting to terror tactics to accomplish this goal; Orthodox civilization, led by Russia, wants to limit U.S. meddling in historically Orthodox regions such as Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and views the U.S. and NATO as putting their civilization under pressure; and, in East Asia, China wants to limit U.S. influence as she feels herself the natural leader of a Sinic civilization.

All the traditional concepts of realism, such as balance of power, still apply to the modern world; however, the overlay to world competition is no longer ideological in the narrow sense, as during the Cold War, but predominantly civilizational, in the sense that deep historical-cultural allegiances motivate action. There is truth in Mr. Bannon’s view that the global struggles facing the United States are rooted in a clash of civilizations. The clash between the West and Islam may, as he contends, be the most prominent.

On the other hand, many on Bannon's side who constantly affirm the reality of civilizational tensions—and insist, for example, that we must use the words “radical Islamic terrorism”—have adopted perhaps the worst possible strategy for addressing intercivilizational disputes. They continue to embrace a large “kinetic” U.S. military presence in the heart of a distant and different civilization. Why is it that “clash of civilization” advocates recognize the cultural problem of millions of Islamic migrants invading Western Europe but are seemingly oblivious of the deep resentments created by there being tens of thousands of Western troops in the heart of Islamic civilization? A clash between civilizations is always a two-way street, and civilizations that tend not to mix well tend not to mix well anywhere.

The failure to take into account civilizational tensions of the deeper sort identified by Huntington continues to bedevil our foreign-policy decisions. “Liberals” and “neoconservatives” in the Obama administration conducted one of the most reckless foreign-policy initiatives of recent decades when, in the name of universal “democratic” values, they backed an anti-Russian coup in Ukraine, a nation with deep historical and cultural connections to the Orthodox civilization of Russia. The Russian intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine after the coup was a not unpredictable reaction by the core state and representative of Orthodox civilization. Backing the coup was a civilizational provocation on the part of Western elites who seemed not to understand the deep bonds that unite those who have a common civilization. Many of the secular “citizens of the world” who populate our foreign-policy establishment, called “Davos Men” by Huntington, seem unsuited to manage many of our most important security challenges because these problems are rooted in cultural and religious loyalties that they do not understand or recognize.

In a world dominated by civilizational competition, the most provocative and foolish policy that a great power can adopt is to meddle directly in the affairs of a different civilization, as the United States continues to do as a matter of policy in numerous places around the world. Neither the Bannonites nor the establishmentarians seem to recognize how perilous and ultimately counterproductive this policy can be. Huntington wrote that it was “most important . . . to recognize that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multicivilizational world.”

Contrary to the caricatures of his ideas, Huntington did not cheer on a “clash of civilizations.” He recommended that we simply recognize the reality of such a clash and develop strategies for maintaining peace within it. Huntington's recommendation was to treasure and cultivate what is best in Western civilization—the rule of law, civil liberties, freedom of expression—but not to advocate the imposition of these values on other civilizations, especially not by force. What is necessary in Western statesmanship is a cosmopolitanism that places a premium upon noninterference and tolerance and that seeks to build on “commonalities” among all great civilizations. Peace, Huntington said, would “depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world's major civilizations.”

The strategies recommended by Huntington are almost the opposite of the policies that the U.S. has followed in recent decades. While the rule of law embodied in the Constitution continues to fray at home, we perpetually meddle in the affairs of other civilizations in ways that stir resentment. We do not generally seek cooperation with other civilizations by looking to what is best in them; instead we transform the leaders of other civilizations into bogeymen and turn them into our enemies, as in the current anti-Russia hysteria. Rather than seeking cooperation with Russia on a genuine and difficult problem like that of Ukraine, a nation torn between two

civilizations, we project belligerence. Places such as Ukraine, where two civilizations are bumping up against each other, are precisely where the great powers must be willing to cooperate in order to avoid a conflagration.

If we are to avoid a world war, the United States must maintain defenses adequate to the realities of international competition, but it must also demonstrate magnanimity and a willingness to cooperate with the core states of other civilizations. As with any great power, Russia and China will on occasion adopt policies that represent challenges for the West. But we must recognize that they dominate civilizations with a cultural richness and depth that in some ways rival those of the West. As representatives of great civilizations they deserve a certain respect. Given that our massive military actions in the heart of the Islamic Middle East have, predictably, been counterproductive and even disastrous, and that tensions are rising between the U.S. and other great powers, it is high time to reinvigorate and develop Huntington's ideas, not to ignore or caricature them. A great danger with the current Trump foreign-policy team is that it is divided into two factions, neither of which seems to have the knowledge and sophistication necessary to formulate strategy for a world of civilizational tension.

Therefore, one can take little solace in the fact that the Trump foreign policy appears now to be moving away from Steve Bannon's "CLASH! of civilizations" paradigm and returning to the neoconservative outlook. According to the latter, the U.S. role in the world is that of a fatherly hegemon enforcing global values that transcend nations and civilizations. With astonishing speed and despite the loud campaign rhetoric about America First, the Crusader Nation seems to be reemerging, this time with Trumpian bravado, with a White House brimming with combat generals and an exploding defense budget.

It is possible that President Trump is still merely trying to show the leaders of the world that he carries a big stick and that behind the belligerent-looking façade he is actually setting the stage for the kind of long-term, noninterventionist foreign policy that he signaled during his presidential campaign. But so far he has seemed to be heading in a direction sharply at odds with what Samuel Huntington would have recommended.