

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 34  
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2004*

Article 10

---

11-1-2004

## The News Media and the “Clash of Civilizations”

Philip Seib

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

---

### Recommended Citation

Philip Seib, "The News Media and the “Clash of Civilizations”," *Parameters* 34, no. 4 (2004), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2231.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

# The News Media and the “Clash of Civilizations”

PHILIP SEIB

© 2004 Philip Seib

The “call to jihad is rising in the streets of Europe, and is being answered,” reported *The New York Times* in April 2004. The *Times* story quoted a Muslim cleric in Britain touting the “culture of martyrdom,” an imam in Switzerland urging his followers to “impose the will of Islam on the godless society of the West,” and another radical Islamist leader in Britain predicting that “our Muslim brothers from abroad will come one day and conquer here, and then we will live under Islam in dignity.”<sup>1</sup>

For those who believe that a clash of civilizations—particularly between Islam and the non-Islamic West—is under way or at least approaching, the provocative comments in the *Times* article were evidence that “the clash” is not merely a figment of an overheated political imagination. Ever since Samuel Huntington presented his theory about such a clash in a *Foreign Affairs* article in 1993, debate has continued about whether his ideas are substantive or simplistic. For the news media, this debate is important because it helps shape their approach to covering the world.

## ***News Coverage and the Huntington Debate***

In Huntington’s article, which he refined and expanded in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, he argued that “the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”<sup>2</sup> In the book, Huntington said that “culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.” Huntington’s corollaries to this proposition, in summary form, are these:

- “For the first time in history, global politics is both multipolar and multicivilizational.”
- As the balance of power among civilizations shifts, the relative influence of the West is declining.
- A world order is emerging that is civilization-based.
- “Universalist pretensions” are increasingly bringing the West into conflict with other civilizations, especially the Islamic world and China.
- If the West is to survive, America must reaffirm its Western identity and unite with other Westerners in the face of challenges from other civilizations.<sup>3</sup>

One reason that Huntington’s clash theory initially had appeal was that policymakers, the news media, and others were moving uncertainly into the post-Cold War era without much sense of how the newest world order was taking shape. They were receptive to a new geopolitical scheme, particularly one that featured identifiable adversarial relationships that would supersede those being left behind.

The us-versus-them alignment of the Cold War’s half-century had been convenient for the news media as well as for policymakers. The American perspective was that the bad guys operated from Moscow and its various outposts, while the good guys were based in Washington and allied countries. Not all the world accepted such a facile division, but those who did found it tidy and easy to understand. Many American news organizations shaped their coverage to conform to this worldview; there was Cold War journalism just as there was Cold War politics.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, and other events marking the end of the Cold War, the news media found themselves searching for new ways to approach international coverage. *New York Times* foreign editor Bernard Gwertzman sent a memo to his staff in December 1992 calling for adjustments in coverage: “In the old days, when certain countries were pawns in the Cold War, their political orientation alone was reason enough for covering them. Now with their political orientation not quite as important, we don’t want to forget them, but we have an opportunity to examine different aspects of a society more fully.”<sup>4</sup>

---

Philip Seib is the Lucius W. Nieman Professor of Journalism at Marquette University. He is a graduate of Princeton University and holds a J.D. degree from Southern Methodist University. Professor Seib is the author of numerous books, including *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy*, *The Global Journalist: News and Conscience in a World of Conflict*, and *Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War*.

---

But absent the Cold War's principal threat—possible nuclear conflict between the two superpowers—interest in international news became less acute. Those “different aspects of a society” that Gwertzman cited were important, but news about them lacked urgency. New villains could be found from time to time—Saddam Hussein was one who filled the bill nicely—but they were not part of a grand scenario such as that of the Cold War.

Even the 1991 Gulf War seemed to take place in a narrow context. In response to an act of aggression that the American government judged to be against its interests, the United States built a coalition and smashed the aggressor. It was a fine showcase for America in its unipolar moment, but it seemed little more than a response to a singular aberrant act. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was not seen as representing any larger cultural or political force.

Nevertheless, something was percolating. In 1993, a car bomb killed seven and injured hundreds at the World Trade Center in New York. In 1995, an alleged plot to blow up a dozen US aircraft was foiled. In 1995 and 1996, truck bombs were used in attacks on American training and residential facilities in Saudi Arabia. In 1998, US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were attacked with car bombs. In 2000, USS *Cole* was attacked by suicide bombers in Yemen.

These and other terrorist incidents received heavy news coverage, but primarily as isolated events. Neither the government nor the news media connected the dots. Although the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 represented a staggering escalation, they were part of this continuum of terrorism. The attacks on American targets throughout the 1990s, as well as incidents directed at non-American targets (such as a 1995 assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak), were parts of a radical Islamist agenda designed by Osama bin Laden and others. Bin Laden himself was a shadowy presence, but not invisible. He had been indicted for the embassy bombings, and he granted interviews to American news organizations. He told CNN in 1997, “We declared jihad against the US government,” and ABC in 1998, “We anticipate a black future for America.”<sup>5</sup>

Bin Laden does not in himself constitute a “civilization” that is clashing with the West. He can be dismissed as a murderer who has merely proclaimed himself to be a defender of Islam. There is, however, more to a decade of terrorism than one man's persistence. Whether Huntington's theory is validated by these terrorist events and whether Huntington's view of conflict should guide the planning of news coverage remains debatable.

Critics of Huntington's theory abound, focusing on a variety of issues, such as the idea that “civilizations” are superseding states. Johns Hopkins University professor Fouad Ajami has said that Huntington “underestimated the tenacity of modernity and secularism.”<sup>6</sup> Terrorism expert

Richard Clarke has said that rather than there being a straightforward Islam-versus-West conflict,

We are seriously threatened by an ideological war within Islam. It is a civil war in which a radical Islamist faction is striking out at the West and at moderate Muslims. Once we recognize that the struggle within Islam—not a “clash of civilizations” between East and West—is the phenomenon with which we must grapple, we can begin to develop a strategy and tactics for doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit take a broader view. They have written that “radical Islamists no longer believe in the traditional Muslim division of the world between the peaceful domain of Islam and the war-filled domain of infidels. To them the whole world is now the domain of war. . . . The West is the main target.”<sup>8</sup> Buruma and Margalit add that this radicalism is not going unchallenged and that “the fiercest battles will be fought inside the Muslim world.”<sup>9</sup> International relations scholar Charles Kupchan has said that “the ongoing struggle between the United States and Islamic radicals does not represent a clash of civilizations,” but rather is the result of extremist groups preying upon discontent within Islamic states. “The underlying source of alienation,” writes Kupchan, “is homegrown—political and economic stagnation and the social cleavages it produces.”<sup>10</sup>

Along similar lines, Zbigniew Brzezinski has written:

The ferment within the Muslim world must be viewed primarily in a regional rather than a global perspective, and through a geopolitical rather than a theological prism. . . . Hostility toward the United States, while pervasive in some Muslim countries, originates more from specific political grievances—such as Iranian nationalist resentment over the US backing of the Shah, Arab animus stimulated by US support for Israel, or Pakistani feelings that the United States has been partial to India—than from a generalized religious bias.<sup>11</sup>

Journalist Thomas Friedman disagrees with Huntington’s approach on different grounds, arguing that Huntington did not appreciate the effects of globalization on cultural interests and behavior. Huntington, according to Friedman, “vastly underestimated how the power of states, the lure of global markets, the diffusion of technology, the rise of networks, and the spread of global norms could trump [his] black-and-white (mostly black) projections.”<sup>12</sup>

Some observers, while not embracing Huntington’s theory, do not write it off altogether. They note a gravitation toward “civilizational” interests. Friedman, for instance, wrote in early 2004: “9/11 sparked real tensions between the Judeo-Christian West and the Muslim East. Preachers on both sides now openly denounce each other’s faith. Whether these tensions explode into a real clash of civilizations will depend a great deal on whether we

---

***“American news organizations do a lousy job  
of breaking down the public’s  
intellectual isolation.”***

---

build bridges or dig ditches between the West and Islam in three key places—Turkey, Iraq, and Israel-Palestine.”<sup>13</sup> University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami noted a shift in self-identification in the Arab world. “Historically,” he wrote, “Arabs have three political options: Islam, pan-Arabism, or nationalism linked to individual states.” But a survey Telhami conducted in six Arab countries in June 2004 found that “more and more Arabs identify themselves as Muslims first.” This trend is not uniform. Telhami noted that in Egypt and Lebanon, people identified themselves as Egyptians and Lebanese more than as Arabs or Muslims, while in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, majorities or pluralities cited their Islamic identity above others.<sup>14</sup>

The debate about Huntington’s clash theory continues, with Islam-related issues receiving the most attention, at least for now. Some observers see new fault lines that may contribute to cultural clashes. Niall Ferguson points to the declining population of current European Union members—it is projected to shrink by about 7.5 million by 2050, the most sustained drop since the Black Death in the 14th century—which will leave a vacuum that might be filled by Muslim immigrants. Concerning the consequences of this, Ferguson wrote, “A creeping Islamicization of a decadent Christendom is one conceivable result: while the old Europeans get even older and their religious faith weaker, the Muslim colonies within their cities get larger and more overt in their religious observance.” Other possibilities, said Ferguson, include a backlash against immigration or perhaps “a happy fusion between rapidly secularized second-generation Muslims and their post-Christian neighbors.” Each of the three could occur in various places, he added.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the initial wave of criticism that his *Foreign Affairs* article stimulated, Huntington stood his ground. In late 1993 he wrote:

What ultimately counts for people is not political ideology or economic interest. Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for. And that is why the clash of civilizations is replacing the Cold War as the central phenomenon of global politics, and why a civil-

izational paradigm provides, better than any alternative, a useful starting point for understanding and coping with the changes going on in the world.<sup>16</sup>

The supply of theories—and theories about theories—is inexhaustible. Fortunately for journalists, they need not—and should not—adopt just one as the foundation for building their approach to coverage. They should, however, become familiar with the diverse array of ideas about how the world is changing. The news media must go somewhere; they cannot simply remain at a standstill while yearning for the return of their neat Cold War dichotomy.

In news coverage, as in politics, a vacuum exists if there is no “enemy.” Professor Adeed Dawisha wrote that “in the wake of the demise of international communism, the West saw radical Islam as perhaps its most dangerous adversary.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, an enemy, and so a vacuum no more. This was apparent immediately after the 2001 attacks, when mainstream American newspapers featured headlines such as these: “This Is a Religious War”; “Yes, This Is About Islam”; “Muslim Rage”; “The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror”; “Kipling Knew What the US May Now Learn”; “Jihad 101”; “The Revolt of Islam”; and so on. Several discussed the Crusades and were illustrated with pictures of Richard the Lion Heart.<sup>18</sup>

Events have pushed many in the news media toward a de facto adoption of the Huntington theory, regardless of its many critics. The 9/11 attacks, the resulting Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War begun in 2003 all lend themselves to political and journalistic shorthand: We have a new array of villains, and they have Islam in common. That must mean that a clash of civilizations is under way.

### ***How America Watches the World***

It is difficult for Americans to make knowledgeable judgments about the existence of civilization-related clashes if the public knows little about the civilizations in question. Although the news media should not bear the entire burden of teaching the public about the world—the education system also has major responsibilities, which it consistently fails to fulfill—news coverage is a significant element in shaping the public’s understanding of international events and issues. Aside from their occasional spurts of solid performance, American news organizations do a lousy job of breaking down the public’s intellectual isolation.

The breadth of news coverage depends on news organizations’ own view of the world, a view that is often too narrow. Expanding it will require a surge of ambition and a reversal of the reductions in international coverage. Media analyst Andrew Tyndall reported that in 1989 the ABC, CBS, and

NBC principal evening newscasts presented 4,032 minutes of datelined coverage from other countries. That had dropped to as low as 1,382 minutes in 2000. With the attacks on the United States and the war in Afghanistan, the figure rose to 2,103 minutes in 2002, which was still only slightly more than half the total of 1989.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the US invasion of Iraq, international coverage by American news organizations rose substantially in 2003, at least for Iraq-related stories. According to Tyndall's ADT Research, the big three US television networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—devoted 4,047 minutes of their principal weeknight newscasts to Iraq. But beyond Iraq, the networks' international reporting was negligible. For all of 2003, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict received 284 minutes, Afghanistan 80 minutes, the global AIDS epidemic 39 minutes, and global warming 15 minutes.<sup>20</sup>

From among these topics, consider what the public is likely to make of the Israeli-Palestinian story when coverage averages less than two minutes per week per network. The issues are complex, and their impact is incendiary in parts of the world. A news organization that provides such scant coverage cannot hope to truly inform its audience, and members of that audience cannot hope to truly understand what is going on.

Also in 2003, the news media virtually ignored humanitarian crises from Chad to Chechnya to Colombia and beyond that were identified by Doctors Without Borders in the organization's annual list of the ten most under-reported stories.<sup>21</sup> When asked if the American public was suffering from compassion fatigue concerning such crises, Doctors Without Borders executive director Nicholas De Torrente said:

If you have very quick, superficial coverage of very difficult, complex issues, then of course people will turn off and blank out and not be interested, and you'll see an ongoing litany of anarchy, chaos, crisis without rhyme or reason. However, if you do look at issues and devote resources and attention to them and try to understand them, then people will catch on . . . and there is a connection that is established.<sup>22</sup>

One aspect of the shrinkage of international coverage is the reduction in the number of foreign bureaus maintained by American news organizations, notably the big three television networks. As of mid-2003, ABC, CBS, and NBC each maintained six overseas bureaus with full-time correspondents, but since the peak of international coverage during the 1980s, each has closed bureaus or removed correspondents when there was not a full bureau in place. ABC did this in seven cities, including Moscow, Cairo, and Tokyo. CBS did it in four cities, including Beijing and Bonn. NBC followed suit in seven cities, including Paris and Rome.<sup>23</sup>



The weakness of international coverage is no secret within the news business. A 2002 study conducted for the Pew International Journalism Program found that among American newspaper editors, “nearly two-thirds of those responsible for assembling their newspaper’s foreign news coverage rate the media’s performance in this area as fair or poor.”<sup>24</sup> When asked about their own news organization’s performance in satisfying readers’ interest in international news, 56 percent gave their own paper a rating of fair or poor (and only two percent rated their paper as excellent).<sup>25</sup>

Editors at newspapers with a circulation of at least 100,000 were particularly critical of television news. Sixty-seven percent of the editors said network television news did a fair or poor job of covering international events, while 40 percent said cable news coverage deserved only a fair or poor rating.<sup>26</sup> Overall, the study found, “The ratings given to international news coverage were significantly lower than those awarded to the media’s coverage of sports, national, local, and business news.”<sup>27</sup>

Such lackluster performance stands in contrast with what the editors perceived as an increase in the public’s interest in international news, which contradicted the conventional wisdom that the American news audience resists learning about the rest of the world. In general, said the editors, only seven percent of their readers were not too interested in international news.<sup>28</sup> Ninety-five percent of the editors said reader interest in international news had increased since the 11 September 2001 attacks, but 64 percent said they believed this interest would soon decline to pre-9/11 levels.<sup>29</sup> This reflects condescension on the part of journalists toward the public that in itself merits study, particularly in terms of the values governing the relationship between the news media and the people they purportedly serve.

Another survey, conducted for the Project for Excellence in Journalism, found that by spring 2002, network television news had largely reverted to its pre-9/11 lineup of topics. The amount of hard news had dropped from 80 percent of stories in October 2001 to 52 percent in early 2002. Meanwhile, the number of “lifestyle” stories made a comeback. Such stories made up 18 percent of total network news stories in June 2001, only one percent in October 2001, and back to 19 percent during the first 13 weeks of 2002.<sup>30</sup> This continued a trend that has been noticeable for more than a decade.

These findings indicate that in this age of globalization, when the news media’s view of the world could and should become ever broader, intellectual isolationism has taken hold, at least in journalism and presumably in other fields as well. When asked what obstacles kept them from increasing international coverage, 53 percent of the editors in the Pew survey cited cost. This was followed by lack of interest by senior editors and lack of experienced reporters, each cited by nine percent of the editors.<sup>31</sup>

Regardless of the rationale that news executives offer for their limited coverage, news consumers are being denied tools they need to evaluate the state of the world. Shortly after the 2001 attacks on the United States, *Boston Globe* editor Martin Baron said that “most Americans are clueless when it comes to the politics and ideology in [the Muslim] world and, in that sense, I think we do bear some responsibility.”<sup>32</sup>

Being clueless is not a good starting point when searching for answers to such persistent questions as “Why do they hate us?” and, for that matter, defining who “they” might be.

### *The Clash of Media Voices*

When Egyptian President Mubarak toured Al-Jazeera’s cramped headquarters in Qatar, he observed, “All this trouble from a matchbox like this.”<sup>33</sup>

For Mubarak and other Arab leaders who prefer their news media compliant, Al-Jazeera has caused plenty of trouble by fostering debate about topics that many in the region—including many news organizations—treat as being outside the news media’s purview. On Al-Jazeera, everything from the role of women to the competence of governments is addressed, often loudly. The station’s motto is, “The opinion, and the other opinion,” which might seem commonplace in the West, but is exceptional in the Arab media world.

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, provided \$140 million to create Al-Jazeera, which began broadcasting in 1996. When the Emir touts Qatar as a progressive Islamic state that welcomes Western investment, he can showcase Al-Jazeera as evidence of his commitment to reform. He tolerates the station’s independence, but Al-Jazeera’s bureaus have periodically been shut down by Middle Eastern governments angered by its coverage. The station was seen mainly as a curiosity until 2001, when its content began capturing international attention. Shortly after the attacks on the United States, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi went on Al-Jazeera to say that he thought the attacks were “horrificing, destructive,” and that the United States had the right to retaliate.<sup>34</sup>

Al-Jazeera also played a leading role in the coverage of the US war against Afghanistan. It was allowed to remain in Taliban-controlled territory after Western journalists were ordered to leave. It presented live coverage of the aftermath of American air strikes and emphasized civilian casualties and reactions to the war.<sup>35</sup> It gained further notoriety by broadcasting videotapes of Osama bin Laden. News organizations that were unable to get closer than the fringes of the war turned to Al-Jazeera for help, and the station’s logo began appearing on newscast footage around the world.

Its constituency was growing. While it covered Afghanistan, Al-Jazeera also kept up its intensive reporting about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a pro-Palestinian slant (suicide bombings were referred to as “commando operations”) and emphasis on the mood on “the Arab street.” Arabs in the Middle East and scattered around the world increasingly turned to Al-Jazeera.

This audience, eager for news featuring an outlook that they can identify with, is hard to define. Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, authors of a book about Al-Jazeera, wrote that “the connections that bind the 300 million Arabs in twenty-two countries are often abstract. It’s not a military alliance, a political truce, an economic cooperative, or a simple linguistic tie. It may not even be reduced to a common religion. Instead, what brings Arabs together is a notion of joint destiny.”<sup>36</sup>

The idea of joint destiny might seem to some skeptics as overrating Arab commonality. Debate about Arab unity—even just unity of aspirations—is similar to that concerning Muslim unity, which is a contentious issue related to the clash theory. Huntington talks about Islam in terms of “consciousness without cohesion,” which he says is “a source of weakness to Islam and a source of threat to other civilizations.”<sup>37</sup> News media and other communications tools might foster increased cohesion. Regardless of how the Arab population is characterized, there clearly is an audience for news presented from an Arab perspective, and with that audience, Al-Jazeera has a credibility that eludes Western media.

The Al-Jazeera story is important because clashes between civilizations can occur in ways other than armed conflict. There can be clashes of perspective, the beginnings and outcomes of which are affected by information flows; how people see the world shapes their attitudes toward other cultures. When Al-Jazeera covered the Iraq War in 2003 and beyond, it did so with a spin that its audience had not seen during the Gulf War a decade earlier. Although there was no effort to paint Saddam Hussein as a hero, the coverage certainly did not feature the boosterism that colored much of the American war journalism. Instead, Al-Jazeera presented a distinctively Arab view of the war, with graphic reports about civilian casualties and later about mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by American and British forces.

And always on Al-Jazeera there was the undercurrent of news about events in Israel, with reporting that was pointedly sympathetic to the Palestinians. Discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of its effect on the overall US-Arab relationship was notably missing from much of the American news coverage and political debate. City University of New York professor Ervand Abrahamian observed that post-9/11 coverage by *The New York Times*, among others, “scrupulously avoided anything connecting the rise of radical political Islam with Israel and Palestine.”<sup>38</sup>

### *The Internet Factor*

Policies and events themselves, not simply the reporting of them, influence political attitudes. News coverage in itself will not create or prevent intercultural tensions, but the flow of information has an effect, and that flow and its effect have been enhanced considerably by the Internet. As an interactive medium as well as a conventional information provider, the Internet can bring unprecedented cohesion to the most far-flung community. Scholar Gary R. Bunt has noted that “it is through a digital interface that an increasing number of people will view their religion and their place in the Muslim worlds, affiliated to wider communities in which ‘the West’ becomes, at least in cyberspace, increasingly redundant.”<sup>39</sup> As the Internet continues to reduce the significance of national borders and other boundaries, the entire array of global media and information technology may help create virtual communities that are as worthy of coverage as traditional states have been.

During the past few years, Internet usage has increased dramatically in some Islamic countries, but as of early 2004 it still lagged far behind the levels of access in much of the rest of the world. No predominantly Islamic country ranks in the top 25 nations in terms of percentage of population with access to the Internet. In the entire Middle East, minus Israel, only five percent of the population has Internet access. In large, predominantly Muslim countries elsewhere, the rate was even lower—for example, 3.6 percent in Indonesia and one percent in Pakistan. Statistics about the growth of Internet use are more substantial: from 2000 to 2004, use in Iran increased almost 1,200 percent and in Saudi Arabia 610 percent. But the figures from Pakistan illustrate how far Internet use still needs to grow. Although usage in that country increased more than 1,000 percent during the four years, in real numbers the expansion was from 133,900 to 1.5 million users, out of a total population of more than 157 million.<sup>40</sup>

Assuming that Internet use in Islamic countries will grow significantly during the coming years, the ummah—the worldwide Islamic population—might become a virtual community with technology-based cohesion. Whether this population will be insular or participate in the larger global community will be a crucial factor in determining the future character of Islam. Those observers who believe that the clash of civilizations will occur might consider any new unification within Islam to be a threat, while those who are skeptical about the clash theory might argue that the Internet will enhance the potency of globalizing influences and lead Islamic states and people toward greater integration with the rest of the world.

Online news providers will be players in this process. Despite the efforts of some governments, such as that of Saudi Arabia, to block access to

certain online news venues, the Internet is increasingly hard to obstruct. It may help to democratize intellectual life in ways that no government officials (or religious leaders) can wholly control. News is becoming more of a global product, and, as with satellite television channels, the Internet could help defuse civilizational clashes by providing information that undermines myths and stereotypes. IslamOnline and many other sources are available to those in the West and elsewhere, serving as educational tools that provide insights about Islamic life. Even without relying on mainstream news media, the individual news consumer can get information directly from sources such as this as well as from governments, NGOs, interest groups, bloggers, and others.

So much information is available that it is bound to have some effect. Whether it can offset deep-rooted hostility and misunderstanding remains to be seen.

### ***Looking Ahead: How the News Media May Adjust***

The continued debate about the clash theory gives news organizations, particularly in the United States, an opportunity to reassess post-Cold War—and now post-9/11—alignments of political and cultural forces throughout the world. In doing so, the news media, like policymakers and the public, should guard against accepting convenient stereotypes and judging civilizational differences in simplistic ways. When Huntington's first clash article appeared in 1993, it seemed to support inchoate fears and reinforce Western predispositions about "the others." But just because the public may be prepared to accept an idea does not mean that the news media should treat it uncritically.

One problem with the news media's and public's view of Huntington's clash theory is that excerpts can be found to suit the political mood of the moment, regardless of how they fit into the broader context of his work. Huntington has contributed to this problem by sometimes using sweeping statements that are the academic equivalent of the politician's soundbite—rhetorically stirring, intellectually imprecise. For example: "The underlying problem for the West 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."<sup>41</sup> Why is this a "problem for the West"? Who are these "people" who are so convinced?

The news media's treatment of Huntington's outlook may render it even hotter and more simplistic. Media versions of Huntington's ideas have come to be regarded by some as conventional wisdom and have elicited responses from Islamic leaders. Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, observed that "the current perception in the West that not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims is not only morally and politically corrupt, but also factually unsustainable." Ceric also said that Islam should not

be labeled a “terrorist religion,” because “the violent small minority of any faith does not represent the peaceful great majority of that faith.”<sup>42</sup>

Huntington’s clash is not solely between the West and Islam. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, he provided maps and descriptions of his version of how the world is divided. He wrote, “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures.”<sup>43</sup> Scholars and policymakers are also looking beyond Islam as they try to anticipate where crises may arise. Zbigniew Brzezinski has written about “the volatile character of Japanese and Korean nationalisms” that “could turn anti-American, igniting a regional Asianist identity that defines itself in terms of independence from American hegemony.”<sup>44</sup> That analysis may be speculative, but such a problem for the United States certainly is possible. This is just the kind of issue that news organizations should examine and plan coverage for before the crisis explodes, rather than waiting and then having to respond frantically.

Even in the Islam-West relationship, facets of civilizational clashes exist beyond those of greatest concern to Huntington. Citing findings of the World Values Survey, scholars Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris write that “when it comes to attitudes toward gender equality and sexual liberalization, the cultural gap between Islam and the West widens into a chasm.”<sup>45</sup> This is yet another approach to cultural conflict that the news media must deal with if they are going to present a comprehensive picture of the state of the world to the public.

Meanwhile, there are those who for their own purposes may wish to foster a violent clash of civilizations. A case can be made that this is a goal of al Qaeda, and if so, the chances of reaching that goal are enhanced by the opinion among many Muslims that the purpose of the United States in Iraq is in part “to weaken the Muslim world.”<sup>46</sup>

Emerging from these and other plausible examples of civilizational conflict, current or prospective, is a complex mandate for 21st-century journalism. For starters, the volume of international news coverage must become more consistent. Anyone thinking that the 2003 Iraq War might mark a lasting turnaround in international news coverage probably will be disappointed. News coverage of major crises evaporates quickly. Using coverage around the time of the 1991 Gulf War as an example, the Tyndall Report found that network news coverage of Iraq went from 1,177 minutes during January 1991 to 48 minutes in August of that year.<sup>47</sup> Coverage of Afghanistan also illustrates the short attention span of many news organizations. According to the Tyndall Report, in November 2001 Afghanistan received 306 minutes of coverage; in January 2002, 106 minutes; in February 2002, 28 minutes; in January 2003, 11

minutes; in March 2003, *one* minute. Comparable declines occurred in American newspapers, and the dropoff is even more precipitous if the coverage appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* is excluded.<sup>48</sup>

The news media today confront an international community that is more amorphous than in the past. Today's "bad guys" (as defined by Western governments and media) such as al Qaeda may have no home that can be identified on a map. That produces disorientation among policymakers and news executives alike. It is hard to plan policy or design news coverage without being able to rely on traditional tools such as maps and lists of foreign ministry officials around the world.

Further complicating the task of understanding the world are the evolving communities of interest, such as the European Union and Mercosur, which make coverage of transnational entities important. Other aspects of globalization take that a step farther, as supranational economic and political interests become more significant. Giant corporations transcend nationality and are governed through cyberspace. Humanitarian emergencies in remote places that would have escaped notice in the past now come into the world's living rooms as "virtual" crises. Non-state "armies" of terrorists compensate for their small numbers by being able to disregard borders and use media to enhance the impact of their actions.

These issues extend beyond the civilizational conflicts that Huntington describes. Policymakers and journalists have similar interests in grappling with these matters. The 9/11 Commission's report addressed the need to engage in a "struggle of ideas."<sup>49</sup> News coverage is part of that. While governments decide how to adapt to these new realities, the news business must realign its own priorities if journalists are to help the public develop a better sense of what is going on in the world.

Samuel Huntington's definitions may be questioned and his conclusions challenged, but he performed a considerable service by pushing policymakers and journalists toward undertaking a more sophisticated analysis of how the world works. Perhaps the result will be more thoughtful policy and more comprehensive news coverage. Any improvement along these lines would be welcome.

#### NOTES

1. Patrick E. Tyler and Don Van Natta Jr., "Militants in Europe Openly Call for Jihad and Rule of Islam," *The New York Times*, 26 April 2004, p. A1.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993), 22.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 20.

4. Bernard Gwertzman, "Memo to the *Times* Foreign Staff," *Media Studies Journal*, 7 (Fall 1993), 34.

5. CNN interview with Peter Arnett, March 1997, "Transcript of Osama bin Laden interview by Peter Arnett," <http://news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/binladen/binladenintvw-cnn.pdf>; ABC interview with John Miller, May 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>.

6. Fouad Ajami, "The Summoning," *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (September/October 1993), 25.
7. Richard A. Clarke, "The Wrong Debate on Terrorism," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2004, p. WK15.
8. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 126.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
10. Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 70.
11. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 59.
12. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999), p. xvii.
13. Thomas L. Friedman, "War of Ideas, Part 2," *The New York Times*, 11 January 2004, p. WK15.
14. Shibley Telhami, "Arabs Increasingly Define Themselves as Muslims First," *Daily Star*, 16 July 2004.
15. Niall Ferguson, "Eurabia?" *New York Times Magazine*, 4 April 2004, p. 14.
16. Samuel P. Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (November/December 1993), 93.
17. Adeed Dawisha, "Arab Nationalism and Islamism: Competitive Past, Uncertain Future," *International Studies Review*, 2 (Fall 2000), 89.
18. Ervand Abrahamian, "The U.S. Media, Samuel Huntington, and September 11," *Middle East Report*, No. 223 (Summer 2002), p. 62.
19. Howard Kurtz, "For Media After Iraq, A Case of Shell Shock," *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2003, p. A1.
20. Jim Lobe, "Iraq Blotted Out Rest of the World in 2003 TV News," Inter Press Service News Agency, <http://www.ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=21802>.
21. Doctors Without Borders, "Top 10 Most Underreported Humanitarian Stories of 2003," <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2003/top10.html>.
22. Terence Smith, "The Unreported Stories," *The News Hour*, 4 March 2002.
23. Lucinda Fleeson, "Bureau of Missing Bureaus," *American Journalism Review*, 25 (October/November 2003), 34.
24. Dwight L. Morris & Associates, "America and the World: The Impact of September 11 on U.S. Coverage of International News," survey conducted for the Pew International Journalism Program, June 2002, p. 3.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
30. Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The War on Terrorism: The Not So New Television News Landscape," 23 May 2002, <http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/landscape>, p. 2.
31. Morris and Associates, "America and the World," p. 22.
32. David Shaw, "Foreign News Shrinks in Era of Globalization," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 September 2001, p. A20.
33. Brian Whitaker, "Battle Station," *Guardian*, 7 February 2003.
34. Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2002), p. 100.
35. Neil Hickey, "Perspectives on War," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2002, p. 40.
36. el-Nawawy and Iskandar, p. 20.
37. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 177.
38. Abrahamian, p. 63.
39. Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 211.
40. Internet World Stats, Usage and Population Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com>.
41. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 217.
42. Mustafa Ceric, "Islam Against Terrorism," speech delivered to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, Vienna, Austria, 14 June 2002.
43. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" p. 40.
44. Brzezinski, pp. 126-27.
45. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "The True Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Policy*, No. 135 (March/April 2003), p. 67.
46. Shibley Telhami, "Manipulating U.S. Elections Is Not an Al-Qaeda Goal," *Daily Star*, 26 July 2004.
47. Kurtz, p. A1.
48. *Ibid.*; Lori Robertson, "Whatever Happened to Afghanistan?" *American Journalism Review*, 25 (June/July 2003), 25.
49. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 375.