

Civilization clash? A nightmare prophecy might be fulfilled: A nightmare prophecy might be fulfilled

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

After leading the West to a victory over Iraq in the Gulf War, President George Bush boldly promised a new world order for the 21st century. That hope received a major blow on September 11. In response, his son George W. Bush launched a military assault on Afghanistan. This action resonates with Samuel Huntington's much-debated 1993 essay, which rejects the new world order and announces an impending "clash of civilizations." Huntington predicted that future wars would be fought not between nations but between competing cultures, and most notably between the West and Islam.

Many conservative intellectuals, journalists and politicians were searching for a new enemy to replace the communist evil empire. They eagerly embraced Huntington's overly simplistic thesis, and began to reduce complex cultural, religious and political conflicts to an easy-to-read, easier-to-report, good guy-bad guy narrative. Osama bin Laden replaced Saddam Hussein as the new Arab villain. Terrorist attacks in 1993 (World Trade Center) and 1998 (U.S. embassies) were attributed to bin Laden. That series of events reached a sensational conclusion in the attacks of September 11.

President Bush was ready with his declaration of war. Huntington's thesis appeared to be a prophecy fulfilled. But there was one political problem. To fight terrorism Bush needs the cooperation and at least the tacit support of Muslim and Arab states. Eager to hold together his coalition, the president insists that his war is with terrorism, not Islam. He is fighting against a tide. The Huntington thesis has already penetrated deeply into the consciousness of a Western culture that likes to see its enemies in sharp focus.

There are early ominous signs that because of the fervor of this war, darkness could descend on cherished civil liberties and freedoms. In the *Washington Times* (October 18), Mona Charen proposed that thousands of Arabs currently in the United States with student and travel visas “should all be asked, politely and without prejudice, to go home. This will work hardships in many cases, and that is regrettable. But, there . . . is no constitutional right for foreign students to study here.” Charen concludes, “We cannot take chances. This is no more than common sense.”

Jonathan Kay, writing in Canada’s *National Post* on October 18, echoed Charen’s tough line, insisting that this is no time to worry about the danger of discrimination. “We should not pretend that an effective fight against terrorism can be waged in a truly color-blind fashion. The fact is, those who plot the annihilation of our civilization are of one religion and, almost without exception, one race.”

What form will this abandonment of basic civil liberties take, in Kay’s judgment? “We are talking about ethnic profiling at airports, the use of informants in suspect mosques [several North American imams have recently been implicated in terror activities] and tracing the expenditures of Muslim charities.”

John Keegan, defense editor for London’s *Daily Telegraph*, writes that since September 11, Samuel Huntington’s thesis “has been taken very seriously indeed.” Keegan knows this war is not another crusade of the sort that sent Christian armies to rescue the Holy Land from Islam. Rather, he insists, this current war is “a far older conflict between settled, creative productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals.”

Keegan concludes that “it is no good pretending that the peoples of the desert and the empty spaces exist on the same level of civilization as those who farm and manufacture. They do not. Their attitude to the West has always been that it is a world ripe for the picking.”

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a media baron before he entered politics, had to “recant” a statement that the West should be confident in the “superiority” of its civilization, but a poll in a newspaper published by his family found that 60 percent of Italians agreed with the superiority claim.

In a recent interview Huntington described the September 11 attacks as a “blow by a fanatical group on civilized societies in general.” But he also wrote: “Some Westerners . . . have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but

only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. . . . The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism but Islam, a different civilization whose 'violence propensity' is exceeded only by that of China." Huntington says that Islam holds to the superiority of its own religious culture, while the West believes in the universality of a culture which it wants to spread throughout the world.

At least 41 leading conservative American journalists, intellectuals and politicians have sent a letter to President Bush urging him to expand the war against terrorism to include attacks that would eliminate the leaders of Iraq and Syria, replacing them with leaders friendly to the West. The letter echoes the hard-line rhetoric of the Israeli prime minister, who recently described "Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority, Syria, Iran and other states" as "terrorist or terrorist-promoting states with grievous records."

The West has the military power to accomplish that goal. But an increasingly angry world Muslim community, which sees the attacks on Afghanistan as attacks on Islam, would find ways to respond. Terror would expand. Huntington's thesis, which reduces complex cultural and religious patterns to a simple narrative of good versus evil, could become a nightmare prophecy fulfilled.