

The real clash: A conflict born out of racism

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

When American administrator L. Paul Bremer III reported to Washington that the Iraqi people were not quite ready for reform, my mind flashed back to one of those British movies set in the 19th century. Typical plot: a colonial governor confronts the powerful nabob who won't play the game the way they teach it at Oxford. He sends an urgent message to London: General election too risky. Stop. Recommend we hold caucuses instead. Stop. Our chaps will vote the way we tell them. Stop. Send money. Stop.

The nabob who has the U.S. worried is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who, in the polite language of the *New York Times*, "holds considerable sway over Iraq's Shi'ite majority." The ayatollah has demanded that an Iraqi government be chosen by direct elections. That's the messy thing about democracy; the results are not supposed to be determined in advance. The ayatollah may not have heard the answer our very own Defense Department poobah, Donald Rumsfeld, gave a few months back when asked if a future Iraqi government would be dominated by a Shi'ite majority. Rumsfeld's reply: "It ain't gonna happen."

New York Times foreign correspondent Thomas Friedman also belongs in a flashback movie. In the tradition of Lowell Thomas, the Boswell of *Lawrence of Arabia*, Friedman has only the best interests of the Arab people at heart when he gives them advice on how best to get along with the West.

A few days after the Christmas terror alert, Friedman was strolling in exotic old Istanbul, and found himself "standing at the stunning intersection of Europe and Asia," where he proceeded to ruminate on "the clash of civilizations—and how we might avoid it."

In his grand sweeping style Friedman asserted: "Make no mistake: we are living at a remarkable hinge of history and it's not clear how it's going to swing."

The “stunning intersection” is the stage for Samuel Huntington’s grand thesis, the Clash of Civilizations, a worldview that is for 21st-century pundits and politicians what Rule Britannia was for those of the 19th. This thesis has become holy writ for many conservative academics, for the Bush administration’s neoconservative warmakers, and for their loyal media allies. Being the hopeful fellow that he is, Friedman hopes we can “avoid” the clash. But then he dashes our hopes with the assertion that the clash has already started because “Osama bin Laden achieved his aim: 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.”

Friedman embraces Huntington’s thesis so totally that he fails to see how much it mirrors 19th-century British colonialism and the British belief that it was the “white man’s burden” to control the non-Western world and make the world safe for Western economic dominance. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said carefully documents how the clash thesis became, in the eyes of the West, a struggle between Judeo-Christian and Arab cultures, in which the Arab side is perceived as inherently inferior, but also happens to be sitting astride trade routes or on top of vast oil reserves.

When Friedman writes that “real tensions between the Judeo-Christian West and the Muslim East” began with the attacks on 9/11, he is reminding his readers that because the Muslim East has not embraced Western democracy and modernity, it remains a threat to the Judeo-Christian way of life. That threat must be eliminated at all costs. Whatever it takes to establish the American empire must be accepted as an unpleasant necessity, even at great damage to our Judeo-Christian belief in justice. So far the cost includes an indefinite occupation of Iraq by the U.S., and the military control of the Palestinian people by our Israeli ally.

Friedman is right on one point—there are preachers on both sides of the struggle promoting their ambitions. He is referring to religious fanatics, but fanatics come in different guises. The dangerous preachers are radical Islamists like Osama bin Laden, who slaughter innocent victims in complete repudiation of the faith they pretend to follow. There are also American radicals, neoconservative “preachers” of the Clash of Civilization worldview, including those members of the Bush team now controlling U.S. war-oriented policies.

The clash is a construct, not a reality, but it is reported as reality by media cheerleaders like Friedman. For example, after months of defending the war in Iraq,

Friedman finally acknowledged that the Bush administration had “stretched the truth” to make its case. But, he continues, look what that bit of stretching accomplished. We beat the Iraqis and we have Saddam behind bars. This sounds like busting a few noses and mussing up the hair of civil liberties to accomplish a positive goal—the current equivalent of destroying a village to save it.

The Boondocks is a comic strip by Aaron McGruder that features two African-American boys and their cranky grandfather. In a recent strip, the grandfather is watching the news on TV. In the first panel the announcer tells the public not to worry about the heightened security alert, but to “keep a lookout for anything strange.”

Panel two: The announcer continues: “We can’t tell you what to look out for or where to look out for it but you know what we mean, and we know that you’ll know what you should be looking for if you see it.” Panel three: Silence. Panel four: “Okay, Arabs. There, we said it.”

Yes, there is a clash of civilizations. But call it what it is: a conflict born out of racism.