

The US media, Huntington and September 11

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN

ABSTRACT *The mainstream quality media in the USA—unlike that of Europe—framed September 11 within the context of Islam, culture and civilisations. In other words, it explained the crisis by resorting to Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of civilizations’. This article has three aims: to illustrate how the media did so; to answer the question why it did so; and to explore the implications of doing so both for the general public and for the academic community. The article argues that the main attraction of the Huntington paradigm is its attempt to analyse international relations without discussing actual politics—especially the issue of Palestine in particular and of Arab nationalism in general.*

Years of experience have taught me that one should never venture an opinion, favourable or unfavourable, on events concerned in any way with Israel. Any attempt at a detached view opens the way for letters, telegrams, personal exasperations and, above all, telephone calls on what the late Sir Lewis Namier called ‘the terror by telephone.’ The only safe course is never, never, never to have any opinion whatsoever on the Middle East.’ AJP Taylor, *London Review of Books*, 17 November 1982

Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name ... is less the absolute limit of discourse than an element that functions along the thing said. There is not one but many silences, and they are integral part of the strategies that underline and permeate discourses. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

Paradigms do not have to be true to become conventional wisdom. Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ is living proof of this. When, in 1993, *Foreign Affairs* first published his article ‘The clash of civilizations?’, the intellectual community in general dismissed it as somewhat strange if not downright wrong.¹ But when the attacks of September 11 took place, his book with the same title but without the question mark became an instant bestseller.² By 2002 Netscape was offering internet surfers free copies. Travellers in some parts of the Middle East are offered copies of *The Protocols of Zion*. We in the USA are offered the *Clash of Civilizations*. What is more, the mainstream media in the USA automatically, implicitly and unanimously adopted Huntington’s paradigm to explain September 11. This article has three intentions: to illustrate how the media used this paradigm; to offer some explanations for why it did so;

Ervand Abrahamian is at the City University of New York, Baruch College, 1 Bernard Baruch Way, Box B 5-200, New York, NY 10010-5586, USA. E-mail: ervand_abrahamian@baruch.cuny.edu.

and to draw some conclusions on the implications of such a usage.

By mainstream media, I mean quality newspapers and journals read by the American literati and intelligentsia, whom political scientists would describe as the ‘attentive public’. The papers include the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*. The journals include *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Republic* and, to some extent, the *Nation* and the *New York Review of Books*. The Huntington paradigm was even more keenly embraced by the tabloid press, the television and radio networks, including National Public Radio, and even smaller quality newspapers—with the notable exception of the *Christian Science Monitor*.³ But then the daily circulation of the *Monitor* is 75 000 while that of the *New York Times* is 1 113 000 and that of the *Wall Street Journal* 1 801 000.

The Huntington paradigm

Huntington’s initial article was soundly trashed by the academic community. Political scientists pointed out that international politics, even in the post-cold war world, are still made by governments, and governments pursue state and national interests—not cultural ones.⁴ Fuad Ajami dismissed Huntington as ‘curious’ and ‘wrong’ on the grounds that ‘civilizations do not control states, states control civilizations’.⁵ In the same vein, Fawaz Gerges argued that politics continue to be shaped by ‘clash of interests, not of cultures’.⁶ Middle East historians noticed that Huntington was rehashing Spengler’s and Toynbee’s jumbo histories. As Roy Mottahedeh politely noted, Huntington, a political scientist, was rushing headlong into a region of the world whose history he knew little about.⁷ To borrow Thomas Kuhn’s terminology, Middle East specialists, both historians and political scientists, concurred that the conventional approach emphasising the paramount importance of states and nations explains reality far better than this new civilisational paradigm.⁸

Other historians pointed out that Huntington’s underlying premises were reminiscent of 19th-century social Darwinism—especially the fear of The Other, of Barbarians at the Gate, and of non-European hordes threatening the West.⁹ In his depiction of the USA as a vulnerable ‘cleft country’, Huntington inadvertently categorised Americans of African and Spanish origins as outside Western civilisation—even though they may have lived in the West for over 300 years.¹⁰ Huntington seems to have rebottled 19th-century fears—the Brown, Yellow and Black Perils—into the Islamic, Sinic, Hindu and African ‘civilisations’.

What is more, anthropologists and social historians who had pioneered the whole field of cultural analysis pointed out that Huntington had discovered culture—his latest book is entitled *Culture Matters*—just when they had given it up as a key concept.¹¹ These same pioneers now treat culture not as a fixed entity with a coherent central essence but rather as contested terrain constantly influenced by external forces and fought over by competing groups. In the words of William Sewell, culture is a ‘volatile concept’ which needs to be reworked and, if not discarded, at least used in the plural and put into quotation marks.¹² From this perspective, ‘civilisation’ is not a useful unit of analysis—especially for explaining the finer points of international politics. Also from this perspec-

tive, it is absurd to boil down complex and self-contradictory ‘civilisations’ into simple ‘essences’—especially when the essence of one is described as ‘bellicosity’ and of the other as the Magna Carta.

Huntington’s triumph

A cursory glance at the US media after September 11 leaves no doubt as to Huntington’s triumph. The media framed the whole crisis within the context of Islam, of cultural conflicts, and of Western civilisation threatened by the Other. Even the liberal *New York Times* adopted this framework, and then tried every so often to distinguish between good and bad Muslims, between the correct and incorrect interpretations of Islam, and between peaceful and violent understandings of the Koran. No doubt its editors would reassure us that some of their friends—nay, even some of their op-ed writers—are Muslim. Such nuances, however, are lost within the larger picture portraying the main threat as coming from the Muslim world. The article headings invariably featured the term Islam. Illustrations often showed bearded *uloma* and angry mobs waving Korans. And a host of ills found in the region from Morocco to Indonesia were traced to religion.

Immediately after September 11, the *New York Times* launched a new section entitled ‘A Nation Challenged’. It continued to appear every day for the next four months. The editors billed it as ‘searching for the causes’ and ‘committed to complete worldwide coverage of the roots and consequences of September 11’.¹³ This section, as well as the regular ones and the op-ed pages, ran reams of articles with such potent titles as ‘Yes, this is about Islam’, ‘This *is* a religious war’, ‘Jihad 101’, ‘The one true faith’, ‘Dictates of faith’, ‘Defusing the holy bomb’, ‘Barbarians at the gates’, ‘The force of Islam’, ‘Divine inspiration’, ‘The core of Muslim rage’, ‘Dreams of holy war’, ‘Mosque and state’, ‘Word for word: Islam’s argument’, ‘The deep intellectual roots of Islamic rage’, ‘The age of Muslim wars’, ‘A head-on collision of alien cultures’, ‘Feverish protests against the West’, ‘How Islam and politics mixed’, ‘Survey of the Islamic World’, ‘Faith and the secular state’, ‘A business plan for Islam Inc’, ‘Hair as a battlefield for the soul’, ‘How Islam won, and lost the lead in science’, and ‘Two views: can the Koran condone terror?’

From the very first journalists had a field day with Muhammad Atta’s final pep talk to his 18 hijacking accomplices. Billed as his last will and testament, his pep talk exhorted them to be resolute in their last hours, to pray and carry out their ablutions, purify their souls of unclean thoughts, treat their victims as ‘animal sacrifices’, and to recite the Koranic verses promising martyrs ‘eternal bliss’.¹⁴ Few noticed that the FBI—for reasons known only to itself—had not released the first half of Atta’s note. This did not prevent them from unanimously concluding that the reason the hijackers had (apparently) left no political demands was that they had none whatsoever. Thomas Friedman, the in-house Middle East expert at the *New York Times*, categorically stated that the hijackers had left no list of demands because they had none and ‘their act was their demand’.¹⁵ Even seven months later, Friedman was insisting that these terrorists left no political demands precisely because they had none, since their real driving force was

'Muslim rage' against Western civilisation.¹⁶ Similarly, Kanan Makiya, analysing Atta's note for the *New York Review of Books*, claimed that the hijackers were motivated not by any specific grievances but by the desire to 'seek martyrdom', 'overturn history' and 'bring back men to the Prophet'. Only in passing did he mention that the first part of the document had not been released.¹⁷

In the months following September 11, the *New York Times* invariably framed the story within this context of Islam. Andrew Sullivan—a devout Catholic who had recently discovered the virtues of the 18th-century Enlightenment—published in the magazine section a long piece entitled 'This is a religious war'. Illustrated with pictures of atrocities from mediaeval Europe, including Goya's *Spanish Inquisition*, Sullivan declared categorically that September 11 was 'only the beginning of a new epic war'.¹⁸ Elaine Sciolino—the author of *Persian Mirrors*—set herself the now oft-posed question 'Who hates the US?' She found the answer in the 1960s, when dissident intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad of Iran had begun to search for cultural authenticity.¹⁹ Al-e Ahmad is probably turning in his grave to hear he is responsible for Mr Atta. Another analytical piece, this time entitled 'Feverish protests against the West', featured a large picture of Richard the Lion Heart and found the source of the crisis in the age-old rivalry between Islam and Christianity.²⁰

Thomas Cahill—a biography of Pope John XXIII—printed a larger version of the same picture and drew a contrast between the flexibility found in contemporary Christianity and the lack of such flexibility in Islam.²¹ A long piece—in the arts section no less—entitled 'The deep roots of Islamic terror' featured two photos: one of a street banner declaring 'Jihad is Our Way'; another of the Koran with bin Laden hovering in the background.²² It cited the Koran on violence, and traced Islamic resurgence to Sayyid Qutb's supposed culturel shock at discovering sexual promiscuity in America. Another piece in the arts section looked back nostalgically to 'Kipling, who knew what the US may now learn'. It featured a picture of British troops proceeding through the Bolan Pass in 1839, and repeated choice quotes from Kipling—'Take up the White man's burden' and 'new-caught, sullen/half devil and half child'.²³ The article concluded that 'history had come to Kipling's rescue'.

In an interview with Huntington himself, the *New York Times* correspondent asked if the crisis had borne out his dire predictions.²⁴ He modestly replied that bin Laden had hastened the 'clash'; that he was not surprised the hijackers were educated since they were motivated by cultural hatreds; nor was he surprised by the violence since bloodshed was intrinsically linked to Islam—in Kosovo, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Caucasus; and that divisions within Islam strengthened rather than weakened his argument since internal competition made the Muslim world even more bellicose against the West. In a long *Newsweek* article, Huntington dubbed the contemporary era as the 'Age of Muslim wars' and listed a series of bloody crises—conveniently overlooking Angola, Mozambique and Rwanda. He argued that September 11 was merely the extension of Muslim wars into America; that these wars were rooted in the 'rise of Islamic consciousness'; and that the enthusiastic support given to the US war on terrorism by the West in contrast to the lukewarm support in the Muslim world verified his worst fears about the clash of civilisations.²⁵

Meanwhile, a barrage of *New York Times* articles made vague but abundant references to Islam to explain a wide variety of ills—social, economic and political ills—found anywhere from Morocco to Indonesia, from the Sudan to Central Asia. ‘Islam’ framed the subject, whether discussing ‘absence of democracy’; educational shortcomings; population explosions; economic stagnation; youth unemployment; willingness of young men to blow themselves up; second-class status of women; failure of science to develop in the Middle Ages; or, of course, lack of enthusiasm for the US war on terrorism.²⁶ The question frequently posed was whether poverty had anything to do with terrorism.²⁷

Mark Danner, a staff writer for the *New York Times*, in an article entitled ‘The battlefield for the American mind’, declared that the 19 hijackers who put on the September spectacular had done so precisely to ‘bring about a new order of purity and Islamic righteousness’.²⁸ Reuel Gerech, a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in the *New York Times* that the Middle East was a ‘brutal land of paradoxes’ and that contemporary ‘bitterness and shame’ sprang from Islam’s past military failures’.²⁹ Lamin Sanneh, a professor of religion at Yale, insisted that there was much anti-Americanism among Muslims because we Americans lack religious zeal, separate church from state, privatise belief and thereby inflame and affront their faith.³⁰ Sixty prominent academics, headed by Huntington, Theda Skocpol, Michael Waltzer, Francis Fukiyama and Amitai Etzioni, signed a 10-page petition endorsing the war on terrorism on the grounds that it defended ‘American values’, ‘our way of life’, and the ‘achievements of civilization’.³¹

Other quality papers and journals dealt with the crisis in similar fashion. David Landes—the renowned professor of history at Harvard who had recently published *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*—claimed in the *New Republic* in all seriousness that Atta and his colleagues had crashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon because they—like the rest of the Muslim World—had trouble accepting the fact that women had attained freedom in the West.³² His article was entitled ‘Girl power’.

Norman Podhoretz exclaimed in the *Wall Street Journal* that a ‘barbaric culture had declared war not because of our policies but for what we stood for—democracy and freedom’.³³ This was to become the Bush administration’s major refrain. The largest news channel, in a programme on ‘American films in the Islamic World’, asked rhetorically, ‘They hate what we stand for, so why do they love our movies so much?’³⁴ Richard Lowry, the editor of the *National Review*, introduced on National Public Radio as a Middle East specialist, claimed that Muslims ‘had a problem in telling the truth’, lived in a completely ‘alien culture’, and invariably supported the strong against the weak.³⁵ He proposed the removal of the Saudi regime.³⁶ To underline his point, he advocated dropping a nuclear bomb on Mecca.³⁷ Dan Morgan, an expert on religion, writing in the *Washington Post*, warned that the government should take care to respect Islam since its ‘great awakening’ had pitted a huge section of the world against the West.³⁸ The article featured a photo of hooded men carrying the Koran and a hatchet.

The most sweeping piece of this genre appeared in the *City Journal*.³⁹ Authored by a military historian, it listed some 50 reasons why the rest of the world should

respect the ‘cultural superiority’ of the West. The list included the Greek defeat of the ‘Peacock Throne’, the Roman destruction of Carthage, Cortes’ conquest of Mexico, and the Crusaders’ capture of Jerusalem. Entitled ‘Defending the West’, the article had two subtitles: ‘Why the Muslims misjudged us’: and ‘They hate us because their culture is backward and corrupt’.

Even more significantly, some of Huntington’s earlier critics begrudgingly adopted his paradigm, Salman Rushdie, in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* entitled ‘Yes, this is about Islam’, argued that Huntington ought to be refined to take into account the fact that the Islamic threat had an internal as well as an external dimension.⁴⁰ Fuad Ajami, describing Al-Jazeera as a ‘Muslim television station’, demanded that something should be done to silence it.⁴¹ Soon a missile ‘mistakenly’ fell on its Kabul office. Robert Kaplan of the *Atlantic Monthly* argued that events had proved Huntington to be correct and praised him for ‘looking the world in the eye’.⁴² Ian Buruma, in an article entitled ‘Occidentalism’, rejected the term ‘clash of civilizations’, but argued that ideological forces waging wars against the West were really fighting against modernity—against urbanism, liberalism, individualism, humanism and rationalism.⁴³ The hijackers, he theorised, saw the Twin Towers as Sodom and Gomorrah.

Foreign Affairs, which had followed up Huntington’s initial articles with a series of critical responses, now ran a special issue entitled ‘Long war in the making’. It was headed with a mediaeval miniature of the Prophet Mohammad leading a military expedition. The lead article argued that the real roots of September 11 lay in seventh century Arabia, in the Mediaeval Crusades, in the Mongol Invasions, and in the demise of the Caliphate.⁴⁴ Even more surprising, *The Economist*, in a special report on ‘Islam’s tensions’, praised Huntington for his ‘cruel and sweeping, but nonetheless acute observation’ about Muslims ‘convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with the inferiority of their power’.⁴⁵

Edward Said wrote in the *London Review of Books* that the ‘reductive and vulgar notion of clash of civilizations had taken over thought and action’.⁴⁶ Similarly, the British *Guardian* warned that September 11 had sent shockwaves throughout the USA with panic over ‘clash of civilizations’ overwhelming issues such as global capitalism.⁴⁷ ‘The thought that such horror could be fuelled by religious anger’, it reported, ‘sent people rushing back to texts they had once ignored. The Koran became a US bestseller.’

Explanations

How can one explain Huntington’s triumph? One could argue that journalists, as well as their readers, share Huntington’s own deeply ingrained premises. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* may be more relevant than many would like to admit. One could argue that, by seeing the world in large civilisational blocs, the USA is striving to preserve hegemony over Europe. One could also argue that journalists and their readers find it easier to grasp Huntington’s broad brush strokes than to examine cumbersome empirical details. After all, his paradigm purports to explain politics all the way from Morocco to Indonesia. The competing state-national paradigm confines itself to particular entities—to 26 different states and

at least 10 major national groups. Obviously religion can not explain why Iran favours Russia against Chechnya, Armenia against Azerbaijan, and India against Pakistan. But how many journalists want to confuse readers with such awkward details? Similar awkward facts arise in trying to explain the attitudes of Muslims in Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo and, of course, Iraqi Kurdistan.

The main reason, however, for Huntington's success lies elsewhere. His forte lies in his ability to analyse international politics without discussing real politics, especially the Arab–Israeli conflict. It is international relations with politics taken out. This fits neatly into the media's, as well as the Bush administration's, conscious decision to sever the Arab–Israeli conflict from the general issue of American unpopularity in the Middle East and of the specific problem of terrorism against the USA. Any linkage is seen as transgressing a taboo line. Using the Huntington paradigm, one can discuss the whole issue of September 11 without raising the dreaded P word—Palestine—the equally dreaded terms 'occupied territories' and settlements, and also the uncomfortable notion of Arab nationalism. Victorians shunned the subject of sex in polite company; contemporary Americans avoid these other uncomfortable subjects when discussing 11 September.

In fact, the *New York Times*, especially its 'A Nation Challenged', published much on the Muslim world—on Islamic theology, hairstyles, and even weather maps of Afghanistan—but kept news about the ongoing *intifada* safely in other parts of the paper. Ironically, in these same months, the editors admitted for the first time that during World War II they had made the conscious decision to bury information about concentration camps.⁴⁸ In this case, they buried political news in reams of articles on theology, mediaeval history, expansion of Islam even into the American Hispanic community, and different interpretations of the Koran, the Hadiths, and the Sharia. A daily paper supposed to deal with current news escaped into the realms of history, theology, anthropology and even cultural studies.

To help readers understand the crisis, the *New York Times* provided a 'syllabus'.⁴⁹ This reading list included such books as *The New Jackals, Terrorism and the Media*, and *Inside Terrorism*. Another New York paper ran a crash course on 'Jihad 101' with a self-styled expert on religious fanaticism who argued that the new breed of terrorists had no political goals but were marginalised men driven by their hatred for secularism and desire for revenge—especially for the destruction of the Caliphate. Of course, this crash course did not once mention Palestine.⁵⁰

On the occasions when journalists did not resort to religious–cultural explanations they still managed to avoid Palestine by repeating the shock shortcomings prevalent in the Middle East—economic stagnation, financial corruption, income inequality and, of course, lack of political participation. Friedman theorised that the 150 million Muslims in India were not crashing planes into buildings and blaming the USA for their ills because they happened to live in a 'pluralistic, tolerant, and free-market democracy'.⁵¹ Presumably, the September 11 hijackers had crashed into buildings in the USA because their governments in the Arab world were not free-market democracies. The *New York Times*, in an editorial entitled 'The anger of Arab youth', claimed that the 'deep roots' of discontent lay

in ‘technological backwardness’, ‘lack of educational opportunities’, ‘poor teaching curricula’, ‘limited economic prospects’, ‘repressive one-man dictatorships’ and, of course, ‘the contrast between past glories of Arab civilization and its current dismal prospects’.⁵²

Few dared to mention Palestine within the context of September 11. When a lone Georgia congresswoman raised the possibility that US support for Israel in the Palestinian conflict might have something to do with September 11, she was promptly denounced for ‘crossing the line’, ‘undermining the war’, ‘giving comfort to the enemy’, and ‘justifying the horror’.⁵³ She was soon swept out of office by a massive influx of out-of-state campaign money. When a Saudi prince uttered the P word while offering \$10 million to survivors of the Twin Towers, the mayor of New York promptly rejected the offer and denounced him for ‘justifying the horror’ and ‘inviting more such horrors’. The State Department weighed in: ‘We object and find inappropriate the Prince’s remarks linking our policy to the attacks’.⁵⁴ When Tony Blair emphasised the importance of dealing with the Palestinian problem while waging the war against terrorism, US papers ignored his statements or buried them in the inside pages.⁵⁵ The *New York Times* claimed without irony that the US media, unlike the British, could not deal with both issues at the same time because it would be ‘equivalent to walking and chewing gum at the same time’.⁵⁶

When bin Laden told Al-Jazeera that his foremost cause, as well as that of the 19 hijackers, was precisely the ‘eighty-year war’ being waged in the Middle East, the White House advised the media not to broadcast such ‘inflammatory propaganda’. The media agreed to edit future tapes.⁵⁷ Dennis Ross, former US envoy to the Middle East, insisted that bin Laden’s terrorism had absolutely nothing to do with Palestine but much to do with his hatred of modernity and Western civilisation.⁵⁸ Ross did not mention that for years Al-Qaida had been incorporating into its recruitment tapes highly charged scenes from Palestine. Others insisted that the ‘eighty years’ referred to the abolition of the Caliphate—which was actually abolished 77 years earlier. In reporting the decision to edit future tapes, the *New York Times* admitted that this was the ‘first time in memory that the networks had agreed to limit their prospective news coverage’.⁵⁹ They had done so, the paper added, for ‘patriotic reasons’ and to save ‘innocent lives’. Not surprisingly, when bin Laden released a second tap declaring that the hijackers had carried out their action to ‘revenge our people killed in Palestine’, the tap was never released.⁶⁰ Americans got to know of it only because Blair cited it when linking bin Laden to the 19 hijackers. Fox News broadcast the first 20 seconds before realising its contents. Other channels ignored it completely on the grounds that it was not ‘news worthy’.⁶¹

When Tony Judt—a Cambridge historian transplanted to the USA—mentioned Palestine in passing within a general piece on Bush’s foreign policy published by the *New York Review of Books*, he was inundated with angry letters denouncing him as a self-hating Jew.⁶² In fact, in the long aftermath of 11 September, only two full-length articles in the *New York Times* discussed the immediate crisis within the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The first, entitled ‘The uncomfortable question of anti-Semitism’, equated anyone who linked September 11 to the Palestinian issue with the German Nazis who had blamed the

Jews for World War II.⁶³ This magazine article included a full-page picture of a large hand pointing a blaming finger at a tiny yellow Star of David. The second article, entitled ‘Exploring the flaws in the “root causes” of terror’, began by arguing that it was silly to look for deep-seated reasons for such a horrendous crime.⁶⁴ It continued by ridiculing the ‘absurd notion’ that US policy towards Israel had anything to do with it. It then concluded with a *volte face* claiming that the real cause lay in the ‘totalitarian religion’. In the words of one European correspondent, Americans find any linking of September 11 to the Palestinian plight as ‘morally questionable’.⁶⁵ In the words of another, American journalists tended to avoid linking September 11 to any political issues—especially to Palestine.⁶⁶

Even when prominent public intellectuals—such as Michael Klare, Arno Mayer and Sheldon Wolin—explicitly rejected Huntington when answering the question ‘Why do they hate us’, they skirted around Palestine and instead headed for globalisation, American omnipotence, Third World pauperisation, Vietnam, Cuba, Lumumba, Chile, the struggle for oil and US support for repressive regimes.⁶⁷ John Lewis Gaddis—the well known historian of the Cold War at Yale—argued that, since lack of freedom was the root cause of terrorism, the only sure way of getting rid of it was to invade the Middle East and remove repressive regimes. He hoped that Bush would continue Wilson’s mission of spreading liberty and ‘making the world safe for democracy otherwise democracy would not be safe in the world’.⁶⁸ Ellen Willis, a prominent professor of journalism and veteran of the peace movement, informed teach-in audiences that the ‘mass psychology of terrorism’ had little to do with Palestine but much to do with ‘sexual repression’ and the ‘culture of patriarchy’.⁶⁹ ‘The twin towers’, she assured us, ‘were sexual symbols with the hijackers indulging in a spectacular dual act of sadomasochism’. September 11 did more than send shock waves through the USA; it unhinged much of the American intelligentsia by giving it a heavy dose of shell shock.

The American approach contrasted sharply with that of leading journalists in Europe. Within hours of the collapse of the Twin Towers, Robert Fisk wrote in the *Independent*:

So it has come to this. The entire modern history of the Middle East, the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the Balfour declaration, Lawrence of Arabia’s lies, the Arab revolt, the foundation of the state of Israel, four Arab–Israeli wars and the 34 years of Israel’s brutal occupation of Arab land ... Some of us warned of the ‘explosion to come’. But we never dreamt this nightmare.⁷⁰

David Hirst of the *Guardian* reported that Palestine was ‘central to the crisis’. He added that, by citing Palestine, bin Laden had struck a resonating chord with much of Arab opinion; and that even ‘the resolutely pro-American King Abdullah of Jordan had told the US he doubted New York would ever have happened had it addressed the Arab–Israel conflict in a more serious, less partisan, way’.⁷¹ Eric Rouleau, travelling through the Gulf, reported for *Le Monde* that the ‘consensus in the region was remarkable’, and that all, from head of state to the man in the street, insisted the issue of terrorism could not be addressed without first dealing with the ‘Palestinian–Israeli conflict’.⁷²

Fred Halliday argued in the *Guardian* that the crisis could be explained by political tensions, especially over Palestine, rather than by ‘nonsense talk of clash of civilisations’.⁷³ The *Observer* reporter at Nablus wrote that from his vantage point the ‘wellspring of anger’ was obvious and that Huntington’s clash of civilisations seemed absurd.⁷⁴ Similarly, Michael Ignatieff, who had recently published a book on the importance of nationalism, wrote in the *Guardian* that the only sure way of winning the war on terrorism was to settle the Palestinian problem: ‘September 11 has made it apparent, for the first time in 50 years, that the peace and security of the West is no longer compatible with the on-going battle in Palestine’.⁷⁵ Curiously, the *New York Times*, in a creative interpretation of the same article, concluded that Ignatieff felt that September 11 had ‘absolutely nothing’ to do with the USA’s support for Israel but much to do with ‘apocalyptic nihilism’ against a ‘sinful and unjust world’.⁷⁶

While the US media diverged from the European, it clearly paralleled the views of the US administration. Throughout the crisis the government insisted that September 11 had nothing to do with US policies in the Middle East. ‘We are attacked’, the mantra went, ‘not because of what we do, but because of what we are’. President Bush, in his meticulously well groomed address to a joint meeting of Congress, began with the question: ‘Why are we being attacked?’ He answered: ‘enemies of freedom’ are attacking ‘civilization’ because ‘we believe in progress, pluralism, tolerance’.⁷⁷ Similarly, in his follow-up address to the UN, he declared the war to be in defence of ‘civilisation’—he used this term no fewer than five times. He ended with ‘we face enemies that hate not our policies, but our existence, our tolerance of openness, and our creative culture’.⁷⁸ Such pronouncements, together with the media blitz, had their intended effects. Immediately after September 11, 68% of the American public felt that US ties to Israel were a major reason for the attack. By late October, this had fallen to 22%.⁷⁹

Implications

The way September 11 was framed has left two lingering implications—one social, the other intellectual. On the social level, it inadvertently but inevitably unleashed a backlash against the US Muslim community. By framing the crisis within the context of Islam, it made all Muslims suspect—unless they could prove themselves innocent of either being terrorists or sympathising with terrorists. To counter the backlash, the President as well as city mayors had to muster a vigorous campaign assuring the public that this was not a war against Muslims but against extremist Muslims—against those who had perverted true Islam. But the association had been made and the damage done.

Daniel Pipes of the Institute for Near East Policy, as well as others of a similar political persuasion, pointed out that the president lacked the theological expertise to decide what was true Islam.⁸⁰ The Reverend Franklin Graham, heir apparent to the famous Billy Graham, declared: ‘We are not attacking Islam but Islam is attacking us. The God of Islam is not the same God. He is not the son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. I believe Islam is a very evil and wicked religion.’⁸¹ He also complained that ‘Muslims had not sufficiently

apologized nor paid enough compensation for September 11'.⁸²

Marvin Olasky, a Republican adviser who had coined the term 'compassionate conservatism', announced that 'any one who believes in Christ should be willing to say that Islam is wrong'. Chuck Colson of Watergate fame, now a born-again Christian heading his own prison ministry, insisted that 'belligerence towards people of other faiths and cultures is inherent to Islam'. The Lutheran Church, one of the largest in the southern USA, excommunicated one of its bishops for joining a Muslim Imam in a September 11 memorial service.⁸³ The Reverend Jerry Falwell, the televangelist who claimed to speak for 70 million Christian fundamentalists, argued that he had studied enough to know that Muhammad, in contrast to the law-abiding Moses, was a 'terrorist' who 'indulged in violence and warfare'.⁸⁴ The Reverend Jerry Vines, a colleague of Falwell, pronounced Mohammad to have been a 'demon-possessed pedophile' who wanted to kill all non-Muslims.⁸⁵ Similarly, the Reverend Pat Robertson, who boasts that he can deliver millions of voters, told Fox News that 'Islam is a warrior religion', 'Muslims were worse than Nazis', and Muhammad was a 'wild-eyed fanatic, a robber, and a killer'.⁸⁶ A group of self-styled 'Jewish community leaders' took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* thanking Pat Robertson for 'speaking out against terror' and for his 'unwavering support for Israel'.⁸⁷

Not surprisingly, the backlash against Muslims was considerable. In addition to verbal and physical assaults, discrimination at work and, of course, special scrutiny at airports, over 1200 Muslim immigrants were imprisoned without officially being charged—ie without *habeas corpus*—as well as without access to lawyers, their families, human rights organisations and their consulates, in violation of the Geneva Convention on Consular Relations.⁸⁸ They became known as the 'disappeared'. A Turkish diplomat complained that this was strange treatment to mete out to citizens of a country at the forefront of the war on terrorism. None of the 1200 was ever linked to September 11. Most were eventually and quietly released. Some were deported—all for visa violations.

Even more disturbing are the intellectual implications. Of course, the triumph of a flawed paradigm is nothing new. After all, in the Middle Ages people believed the earth to be flat and at the centre of the universe. Early Modern Europe lived in fear of the devil and his witches. Nineteenth-century Europeans saw race as determining intelligence, income, power and the course of human history. What is disturbing about Huntington's triumph is that it has taken place in a pluralistic society with apparently open and free media—but one that has implicitly drawn a taboo line on what can and can not be said.

This has had far-reaching consequences for Middle East specialists. Specialists who did not explain the crisis in the context of Islam and instead asked awkward questions were sidelined, leaving the field wide open to so-called experts on 'terrorism', 'religious extremism', and 'Islamic fundamentalism'. In an article entitled 'Send in the historians', the maverick *Christian Science Monitor* sarcastically remarks that Americans could now tell the difference between the Taliban and Autobahn, but still had trouble putting events within any meaningful context.⁸⁹ One Middle East expert told the *Christian Science Monitor* that she had watched CBS almost non-stop in the first week of the crisis but did not see a single professional historian. Another—a Harvard anthropologist—admitted he

had completely stopped watching television since the networks had nothing pertinent to say about the crisis.

The few Middle East specialists who did appear at the height of the crisis exercised self-censorship. Fawaz Gerges—the author of an earlier book which was a critique of Huntington—in a long op-ed piece in the *New York Times* explained America's unpopularity in the Middle East by citing Iraq, support for autocratic regimes, the conspiratorial mentality, and suspicions about its designs on oil and Central Asia.⁹⁰ The P word did not intrude. Elsewhere Gerges claimed that the Arab–Israeli conflict had distracted Middle East scholars from more important issues.⁹¹ Fareed Zakaria, former editor of *Foreign Affairs*, argued in *Newsweek* that the USA's main problem in the region was its support for politically repressive and economically inefficient regimes.⁹² Palestine was mentioned only in passing. Likewise, Lamin Sanneh, professor of religion at Yale, after posing the question 'why has the West become a target?' answered that Muslim fundamentalists could not tolerate the separation of religion from politics: 'what most inflames anti-American passions is the American government's lack of religious zeal ... America is the most secular of all governments'.⁹³ Again the P word did not intrude. Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian* reported that New York was reminding him of Brezhnev's Moscow.⁹⁴

To silence others, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, headed by Lynne Cheney—wife of the Vice President and the former chair of the National Endowment for Humanities—brought out a 37-page pamphlet entitled *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It*.⁹⁵ The pamphlet warned university trustees that their institutions were undermining Western civilization by offering too many courses on such 'narrow and trendy' subjects as the Middle East. The pamphlet also listed academics who had recently expressed questionable opinions. The list named a number of Middle East experts, including Joel Beinin, who had just been elected president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA). Beinin was taken to task for preferring an international rather than a national tribunal to try bin Laden for crimes against humanity. Cheney's pamphlet was highly praised by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times*.

Meanwhile, the Washington Institute for Near East Studies—whose advisory board includes Alexander Haig, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz—published a book entitled *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.⁹⁶ Authored by Martin Kramer who had just moved to Washington from the Dayan Institute, the book claimed that Edward Said's omnipresent and omnipotent influence had both undermined Middle East studies and prevented US scholars from predicting such disasters as the Iranian Revolution, the resurgence of Islam, the rise of the Taliban and now September 11. Since these scholars had done such a poor job, Kramer argued, Congress should stop funding Middle East programmes in US universities. In fact, the little federal money that goes into Middle East studies flows mostly into language programmes. To underscore the threat, the *New Republic* praised Kramer and claimed that in the last MESA annual meeting its members had been overheard denouncing the USA and 'condoning' bin Laden.⁹⁷ 'Anti-Americanism', claimed the *New Republic*, 'reigned supreme at MESA'. Kramer

also began posting ‘dossiers’ of academics suspected of harbouring anti-American sympathies in a website called CampusWatch.

Not surprisingly, the public arena was left to the one prominent Middle East specialist who very much reinforced Huntington’s paradigm—namely Bernard Lewis. If Lewis failed to cite Huntington by name it was because of intellectual property rights, not because of intellectual differences. Three years before Huntington’s original article, Lewis had published in *Atlantic Monthly* an article entitled ‘Roots of Muslim rage’ illustrated with pictures of sinister Janissaries and even more sinister snakes in the desert sand.⁹⁸ Two years previously, he had warned in the *Wall Street Journal* that if US universities diluted their course offering on Western civilisation the world would inevitably revert back to slavery, polygamy, despotism, and barbarism.⁹⁹

In the months subsequent to September 11, Bernard Lewis was very much in the limelight, giving frequent television interviews, publishing numerous articles, and coming out with a new book *What Went Wrong?* which further elaborated on his ‘Roots of Muslim rage’.¹⁰⁰ The press described him as a ‘media star’.¹⁰¹ Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, hailed him as a ‘great Anglo-American scholar’.¹⁰² In these new works, as in previous ones, Lewis skirted around Palestine and the occupied territories—the latter were not mentioned once in *What Went Wrong?* Instead, he presented his usual litany of complaints about the Middle East—failure to separate religion from politics, incompatibility of democracy and Islam, humiliations over military defeats, resentment over the destruction of the Caliphate, hurt pride over a lost civilisation, rejection of modernity, nostalgia for the past, obsession with the Mediaeval Crusades, and fascination with terrorism—after all, half a century earlier, he had discovered that the English word ‘assassin’ originated from the Middle East. He told a television audience that we should stop asking ‘Why do they hate us?’ since they have been hating us for centuries and it is natural for them to do so. We should be asking: ‘Why do they neither fear nor respect us?’. To counter their ‘insults’ and ‘bullying’, he recommended ‘tough’ action and implied that US invaders would be received in the Middle East as ‘liberators’.

Paul Kennedy, the highly respected professor of European history at Yale, reviewing *What Went Wrong?* for the *New York Times*, praised Lewis for showing that the ‘conflict between the West and Islam has been in the making for centuries’. His review was called ‘The real cultural wars’.¹⁰³ The key terms here as elsewhere were ‘culture’, ‘civilisation’, and ‘Islamic terrorism’. Once again a deafening silence reigned over political issues—especially Palestine and Arab nationalism. In describing the crisis in such terms, Kennedy was revealing more than personal perceptions. He was revealing perceptions prevalent in American academia. Years ago Ivan Hannaford, the author of the classic *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, showed how by the beginning of the twentieth century the West tended to see the world through the prism of race. The concept of race, Hannaford argued, was definitely in—that of politics was out.¹⁰⁴ Now we can say that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the concept of culture is definitely in—that of politics is out. It took some awkward eruptions, such as World War I, to undermine the race paradigm. Let us hope the same will be done to the cultural paradigm without the need for equally awkward eruptions.

Notes

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