

# Samuel Huntington Correctly Predicted What's Happening In Ukraine



A clash of civilizations map based on Huntington's book by  
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by Geoffrey Clarfield and Salim Mansur

In 1996, the late Samuel Huntington (1927-2008), a respected Harvard professor, published *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. It was his rejoinder to Francis Fukuyama's 1992 bestseller, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Both were engaged in imagining the future of the post-Cold War world.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine reminded us of the debate that had unfolded over Fukuyama's and Huntington's differing visions.

For Fukuyama, the Cold War's end was also an end of History with a capital 'H', meaning the notion of history driven by ideological conflicts. In his view, though troublesome events would still arise, these would not up-end the global spread of

the neo-liberal, rule-based world order in terms of freedom, democracy, a market economy, and secularization of cultures, all as summed up in the American experience.

Huntington's view was less optimistic. He saw the Cold War's end as a transition into a world in which the divisions among the great powers once based on political ideologies would be replaced by the more enduring divisions in history grounded in cultures and religious traditions. Huntington defined civilization as the broadest cultural identity in history.

Hence, Huntington predicted a "clash of civilizations"—a phrase borrowed from Bernard Lewis, historian of the Middle East and the Islamic civilization—darkening the future of the new century and millennium ahead.

Huntington cautioned fellow Americans, especially the Fukuyama-like optimists: "In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilizational clash, Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous." He added, "The belief that non-Western peoples should adopt Western values, institutions, and culture is immoral because of what would be necessary to bring it about... Imperialism is the necessary logical consequence of universalism."

Events showed Huntington was prophetic and erased Fukuyama's rosy outlook.

The "global war on terrorism" was a response to the Islamic extremist terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, coupled with the neoconservatives' argument that we must spread democracy and American values abroad. This morphed into an endless war across blood-drenched boundaries of civilizations, just as Huntington foresaw. The same global war on terrorism vaporized the anticipated "peace dividend" from the Cold War's end. Lastly, the rebooted confrontations with Russia have ignited a lethal war in Ukraine, through which runs the

fractured civilizational East-West frontier in Europe, bringing back with a vengeance the heightened tensions of a Cold War that seemingly never ended.

With specific regard to the conflict, the Soviet Union's collapse resurrected pre-communist Russia's past as the civilizational center of Orthodox Christianity and Moscow as the third Rome. Independent Ukraine, however, is a "torn" country. Half the population is ethnically Russian and, as Orthodox Christians, linked to Russia; the other half is of mixed ethnicities and its cultural and historic affinity rests in Europe to the West of Russia.

It's not ironic to see in this war a civilizational conflict. On the one side are those Ukrainians seeking support from the West (EU and NATO) to defend their perceived cultural identity in terms of western Enlightenment. On the other side are the Russians who resist Western values because they subvert their cultural identity and their revived Orthodox Christianity.

With an eye to events in Ukraine and their functioning as a microcosm of a schism playing out around the globe, Huntington's thesis is somewhat limited because he left unexamined the effects of civilizations' internal decay. For example, he did not consider the degrading effects on American culture that Allan Bloom, in 1987, examined in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Nor did he take into account books, such as Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1984) or Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), or Lasch's later book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (published posthumously in 1997).

Bloom, Postman, and Lasch were describing what happens when a culture begins dismantling its foundational values and, consequently, loses its spiritual vitality. In such a culture, where people increasingly seek only pleasure, the citizens live for the moment, cut adrift from the past, and uncaring of

their future. Lasch was almost Burkean in writing, "The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past."

Huntington simply could not imagine that an increasingly faithless, feckless, radically secularized, and libertarian West (and America) might be a greater danger than other cultures in widening the post-Cold War world's civilizational divisions. In other words, he did not perceive that the contemporary West, culturally in disrepair and spiritually broken, can provide neither leadership nor moral guidance to others when needed in preventing the clash of civilizations.

Huntington was also not entirely right about America's foundational culture based on Enlightenment values being unique because it has universal appeal. But he was right that America, by spreading her culture (however degraded), when backed by force (defensive or otherwise) to non-Western peoples, would corrupt her American exceptionalism into American imperialism.

For the last twenty years at least, America would have done well to recall John Quincy Adams's words:

*Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America's] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.*

For the United States to invite, or entice, Ukraine into NATO was recklessly widening the internal divide of a "torn" country, while appallingly baiting Russia to invade preemptively to cancel that invitation. Consequently, the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine has as much to do with Russian revanchism, as it is with American hubris that has made the people, especially their leaders, heedless not only to

Huntington's apprehension but also to the warnings of George Washington in his farewell address—an address that is even more relevant in the post-Cold War world than when given in 1796.

Washington warned, “Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns.” Furthermore, “Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice? It is our policy to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.”

The lesson, therefore, for Americans to draw from Ukraine's tragedy is that, when distant clashes occur along civilizational boundaries for reasons that are foreign to America, then American involvement may do more harm than good. If Americans wish others to pay heed to them, they need to be true in words and deeds to the foundational values of their culture and then, deservedly, others may listen.

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