

# The meaning of Huntington

by Eric Kaufmann

*Samuel Huntington died a pariah among America's intellectual elite. It's because he was normal*

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Samuel Huntington passed away on Christmas Eve. He is assured a place in the pantheon of modern "big idea" thinkers, alongside his student Francis Fukuyama. But few in this group were as controversial, or as consistently unpopular among their peers. Huntington was accused of everything from militarism to nativism. Noam Chomsky attacked him in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* over the bombing of Vietnam, and later described the *Clash of Civilizations* (1996)--Huntington's most famous book--as a tool for the American elite to "control people." He was denied membership of America's prestigious National Academy of Sciences twice.

Why did he raise such hackles? Certainly, he was politically difficult to pin down. A lifelong Democrat, who worked for the ultra-liberal presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and voted for John Kerry in 2004, he was also a consistent conservative who backed the Vietnam war. His brief military career left an indelible mark, nowhere more evident than in his first book, *The Soldier and the State* (1957), which extols the ethos of the elite West Point military academy. At West Point, he wrote, "collective will supplants individual whim"--a latter-day Sparta in the midst of a civilian Babylon. With this book, his destiny to rile liberal colleagues was well underway; one reviewer portrayed him as a third-rate Mussolini.

Both WASP and Episcopalian, he spent nearly half a century at Harvard and is descended from several generations of Harvard men. But his nationalism was political, not ethnic, valuing institutions like the military and the constitution rather than a timeless landscape or heroic ancestors. In *The Promise of Disharmony* (1981), he writes of American identity as an idea. America lacked class conflict, so had no need for the mystical folk nationalism of Europe. WASPs and immigrants alike, he argued, were eager to throw off their past and forge a liberal nation. Not a word did he write romanticising puritans or pioneers.

Huntington was instinctively a conservative because he valued an ordered society, but he also championed conservatism as a necessary instrument to defend liberal institutions against communism. In many of his books he attacked idealistic liberals for holding such institutions to impossible, utopian standards that undermined their effectiveness in the world.

Right up to the fall of communism, Huntington's thinking bore the impress of cold war neoconservatism. He believed that non-western culture presented few obstacles to the spread of democracy. But the collapse of communism shook this view, generating in him a new appreciation for the power of culture. Four years after the fall of the Berlin wall he penned his signature article, "The Clash of Civilizations," later turned into the book of the same name, arguing that cultural conflict would define the post-cold war era.

Huntington had a cyclical view of history, and feared a decline of America and the west through hubris and decay. In *The Clash of Civilizations* he argued trenchantly for a revival of collective spirit, and a rejection of both multiculturalism at home and neoconservative universalism abroad. Better, he came to think, to keep America strong by respecting differences overseas while striving to renew western civilisation at home.

It was not until 9/11 that Huntington became a household name; his "clash of civilisations" catchphrase adopted by everyone from southern Sudanese rebels to Silvio Berlusconi. It also ignited controversy. From the left, Edward Said claimed that a "clash of ignorance" was painting Islam as a monolith. From the right, neoconservatives were dismayed at Huntington's rejection of their universalist incursions into Muslim lands. (His opposition to the second Iraq war, inconvenient and largely ignored by liberal critics, is quite consistent with his scepticism of the universalisms of both left and right.)

In his final polemic, *Who Are We?* (2004), Huntington raised the stakes by urging a renewal of American cultural nationalism. Hispanics had overtaken African-Americans as the largest minority, and as a result multiculturalism was challenging the nation's anglo-protestant cultural centre. In response, Huntington rethought his exceptionalist, creedal nationalism to include a cultural component. In taking this step, he resembled his fellow Wasp New Yorker, the late historian John Higham, who worried that the volume and geographic concentration of Hispanics differed from the dispersed, polyglot influxes of the past. Huntington's fears of Latino secession are surely misplaced, but his concern for America's cultural centre and his disdain for its cosmopolitan absentee elite resonated with many Americans. The nation's intellectual elites were less amused, describing his book as racist and ensuring him virtual pariah status at Harvard and beyond.

This should not stop us recognising his achievements. He provides a much needed cultural corrective to both "realist" international relations theories, and Francis Fukuyama's liberal internationalist *The End of History*. Ultimately, however, Huntington's civilisational argument fails as a clear explanation of state behaviour, mostly because people cannot imagine their civilisation as they can their nation. People distinguish themselves from next door nations but not distant cultural blocs. Shared civilisational identity can count when alliances between countries are formed, but it is far from decisive. Islam and western Christendom might seem to be partial exceptions to this rule, but even the umma and EU remain too abstract for most.

An iconoclast to the core, Huntington never threw his lot in with left or right. He was too statist to be a libertarian, too realist to embrace neoconservatism, and too sympathetic to nationalism, religion and the military to identify with liberal Democrats. As a conservative Democrat, then, he is an intellectual rarity. But his estrangement from the American elite merely confirms him as normal: the median postwar American voter has always identified as a conservative Democrat. A tiny band of liberal nationalist centrists--figures like Michael Lind or the recently deceased Arthur Schlesinger Jr--are his true kindred spirits. In arguing for a less overbearing America that should just be itself, they, more than his illustrious students, define Huntington's legacy.

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