

The Value of Historical Study and the Clash of Civilizations

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I. Introduction and Historical Context

In the late 1970s, the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin entitled an essay, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” in which the question mark denoted doubts concerning the viability of the intellectual field itself, and in which he commented that support for the negative viewpoint emanated from the fact that “no commanding work of political philosophy has appeared in the twentieth century.”¹ I will submit that the long twilight of the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union, in which the proponents and tenants of capitalist democracy and Marxist communism struggled, bounded the possibilities of debate over the future of the world at that time. However, in the late 1980s as the Cold War was resolved and the Soviet Union literally disintegrated, the possibilities for the application of political theory to the future opened with two inspired works which have set our current standards for debate. In 1989, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama published his essay “The End of History” in which he posited that the ideological battles of the twentieth century had finally been concluded, and that capitalist democracy was the accepted model for future global development. Fukuyama expanded his ideas into a book in which he additionally examined the likely future problems concerning the Nietzschean “Last Man,” a democratic creature whose physical wants are so fulfilled that it leads to a slavish existence and spiritual decline.² Fukuyama did not predict that the 21st century would be an era of perpetual or “Eternal Peace,” as envisioned in 1784 by Immanuel Kant³; but the idea of a generally peaceful world order where the expansion of democracy made major wars a thing of the past was inherent in his thinking.

In contrast, Harvard political philosopher Samuel Huntington published in 1993 his essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” in which he argued that contrary to Fukuyama’s vision of the future, the 21st century would not be an era of expansive peace, but that violent political conflict was more likely, not less, in the future. Huntington expanded his views into a book (which removed the question mark) in which he argued that while the Western wars of ideology from

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” as found in The Proper Study of Mankind (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), p. 59.

² Please refer to Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

³ Please refer to Immanuel Kant, “To Eternal Peace,” in Allen Wood, editor, The Basic Writings of Kant (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 433-475.

the twentieth century were now over, this opened the way for older, more historical rivalries based upon civilizational fault lines to re-emerge. Huntington identified eight world civilizations (he acknowledges that other scholars have identified upwards of twenty) with differing value systems, and he posited that future political conflict would most likely develop from clashes between the cultural value systems of the political states and actors within these civilizations.⁴

The current writer recalls that when he was in graduate school, Huntington's ideas were initially received as the proverbial skunk at the party. The 1990s flourished as a time of growing globalization, capitalist expansion, and Eastern European democratic reform which seemed to point to a rising peaceful and prosperous 21st century. The terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists upon the symbols of American (and hence Western) economic, technological and political power on September 11, 2001, instead demonstrated that a strong resistance to Western ideals existed, undermining faith in the likelihood of a peaceful future. Huntington's thesis has received world-wide and intensive scrutiny as a result.

II. Civilization as an Analytical Concept for the 21st Century

It is my contention that Huntington's Clash of Civilizations is in fact as realistic a theory for the likely future of political conflicts in the 21st century as any currently available. Civilizations as analytical concepts, however, must be distinguished across cultural maps or terrains; they are not exclusively political in definition. As Huntington points out, civilizations might maintain multiple governments and they do not perform the political functions of governments.⁵ Most importantly, civilizations are historical as well as cultural entities. As historical entities, any analysis and understanding of political relations between civilizations and their member states in the past, present or future must be rooted in history and the act of historical study.

There is a long tradition of studying civilizations as conceptual and historical entities, going back through scholars such as Arnold Toynbee and Fernand Braudel (to cite just a few examples). How different civilizations value historical study, and how they practice history (in

⁴ Please refer to Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁵ Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order, p. 44.

particular, I will argue that the West practices a distinctive history) will help determine how these entities interact with each other and the trajectory of the political future.

III. The Clash of Civilizations: The Challengers

Huntington identifies two challenger civilizations to the dominant Western civilization and its value systems regarding democracy, capitalism, and scientific technology: the Sinic and Islamic civilizations. He points out: “Islam and China embody great cultural traditions very different from and in their eyes infinitely superior to that of the West.”⁶ I am not a scholar of expertise in either of these two fields; however, I will briefly comment upon the nature of these challengers to the West, and their own cultural attitudes towards the study of the past.

Regarding the challenge of Islam, the first problem that must be noted is the lack of political coherence. Islam is a broad religious and cultural movement with many different sects, governments, and political actors, and Huntington himself doubts that Muslim societies will achieve political coherence and unity by either democratic or despotic leaders in the future.⁷ This political division of Islamic civilization makes Islam a unique challenge in understanding for outsiders. However, the fundamental connection amongst its members is religion, and a religion with a particular kind of reference point to the world that has deep implications for the historically conscious. What is central to this religion is its universalism and unique grounding in the abstract. History, and the idea of change in societies and individuals passing over time, is not as essential to Islamic civilization as its religious mission in which all humanity is inevitably enfolded and embraced by the abstract One, an omnipotent God. This was noted as early as 1840 by the philosopher G.F. Hegel, who wrote:

“The leading features of Mohammedanism involve this- that in actual existence nothing can become fixed, but that everything is destined to expand itself in activity and life in the boundless amplitude of the world, so that the worship of the One remains the only bond by which the whole is capable of uniting. In this expansion, this active energy, all limits, all national and caste distinctions vanish; no particular race, no political claim of birth or possession is regarded- only *man* as a *believer*.”⁸

⁶ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, p. 185.

⁷ “The Clash of Civilizations Revisited,” in the *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Volume 24 #1, Winter 2007, www.digitalnpg.org/archive/2007, p. 3.

⁸ G.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), p. 356.

The contemporary rise of Islamic terrorism reflects an interpretation of Islam in which, like Lenin's vanguard party, a minority gives history and Divine Will a violent push towards an inevitable completion. Not all Muslims or Muslim states aspire to the forced universal conversion of humanity, and terrorism in this light becomes a political problem to be managed by governments and political actors.

However, in the nineteenth century Hegel also concluded that "Islam has long vanished from the stage of history at large, and has retreated into Oriental ease and repose."⁹ This most certainly is not the case in the early 21st century. Islam underwent a deep revivalist wave in the late twentieth century; in an interesting turn of comparison, Huntington himself writes that "To ignore the impact of the Islamic Resurgence on Eastern Hemisphere politics in the late twentieth century is equivalent to ignoring the impact of the Protestant Reformation on European politics in the late sixteenth century."¹⁰ To the West, the political threat exists in the mutated strain of Islamic terrorism, which seeks to destroy Western modernity and secularism. Dealing with this threat is complicated by issues of immigration and demography, especially in Western Europe.¹¹

In seeking to understand the meaning of this Islamic Resurgence to Western civilization in the coming century, it is useful to remember that Islam and the West have a long interactive history upon which to draw. Historians are not in the business of prediction, but two main themes or outlines of communication are vaguely visible between the West and Islam as we peer through today's headlines into the future.

First, the tradition of rationality provides a basis of historical communication between the West and Islam. As one Islamic writer noted of Pope Benedict XVI, the Pope is currently seeking a dialogue based on rationality and conducted between cultures, built upon a shared idea of human nature that transcends ideological, religious, or political particulars. Humanism and a renewed sense of sacredness towards the Divine in both Christianity and Islam are the principles upon which political conflicts might be ameliorated. Pope Benedict XVI points out, what offends Muslims is not talk of religion or the Divine, but rather Western secularism.¹²

⁹ Ibid., p. 359.

¹⁰ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, p. 111.

¹¹ For a current perspective, please see Mark Steyn, *America Alone* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2006).

¹² For an example, please see Samir Khalil Samir, "Benedict XVI and Islam," www.asianews.it, February 9, 2007, p. 1-4.

Accordingly, the biggest future obstacle might not be a Christian revivalism, but Western secular attitudes towards religion in general.

Second, tied to this dialogue is discussion within Islam itself of an Islamic Reformation, echoing the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther in the West in the sixteenth century. New interpretations of the old Koranic texts along a humanistic path, within lights shed by modern science and technology, should be encouraged by the West as a prevalent feature in the Muslim future.¹³

The greatest difference between the Islamic and Sinic challengers lies in China possessing a political state to match its cultural and historical identity. For the West, the immediate conflict with China assumes a more conventional and recognized form via competition over economic and political issues. As China modernizes its economy and seeks political and military hegemony over the Asian sphere, clashes with the West may become more likely. The Japanese Meiji, the first Asian government to successfully modernize and defeat a Western power over a century ago, serve as the starting model for China's future. Most threateningly for Sino-Western relations, due to vast expansions in Chinese technological abilities and American cut-backs of its nuclear stockpiles, a new arms race might loom as the Chinese have an opportunity to achieve nuclear parity with the United States.¹⁴ Peering into the future, however, China faces deep long-term challenges to its internal stability. While impressive, economic growth has come with environmental costs and has not been evenly spread or benefited all geographic regions and classes, while political power remains centered in a ruling Communist party whose Marxist justification for its monopoly hold on power is now openly contradicted by its adoption of capitalist economic policies. As its population of elderly doubles from 146 million to 290 million within the next twenty years, China will face a demographic crisis that will test and challenge its economic and political resources.¹⁵

But one other key difference between the Islamic and Chinese challengers leaps out: their historical consciousness as civilizations. While Islam's historical vision is focused upon the spread of Islam to humanity as an abstract religious process from which history reveals Divine will, China is the oldest culture on earth and to them, history begins with Chinese civilization.

¹³ For an example, please see Mansour al-Nogaidan, "Losing My Jihadism," www.washingtonpost.com, July 22, 2007, page B1.

¹⁴ Please see Mark Helprin, "The Nuclear Threat from China," www.washingtonpost.com, March 4, 2007, page B7.

¹⁵ Please see Jehangir S. Pocha, "The Graying of China," www.boston.com (the Boston Globe), January 2, 2007, page 1.

“No people has so strictly a continuous series of Writers of History as the Chinese,”¹⁶ and within China “the Historians are some of the highest functionaries”¹⁷ of the state and culture, noted Hegel. The continuous nature of Chinese life and culture as living entities spreading across the geographic regions of Asia and across the centuries imbues the Chinese with a special sense of the past: a longer, stronger, unbroken and unconquered chain in which all other histories and national entities are intertwined in a secondary nature to the permanent and central place of China within world history and politics.

This deep sense of history both hinders and aids the Chinese in their sense of endurance: they have seen the centuries unfurl in a manner which the relatively young Western civilization (much less the American nation) has not, and it gives them a confidence in the future that no matter what may come in the next century, they will endure and triumph again. This sense of the long view of history is the foundation upon which Western policymakers should engage China in the 21st century.

IV. History and Prediction

The Oxford philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood wrote that “The historian’s business is to know the past, not to know the future, and whenever historians claim to be able to determine the future in advance of its happening, we may know with certainty that something has gone wrong with their fundamental conception of history.”¹⁸ Historians pride themselves precisely on looking backwards, not forwards: the future is not our business, except that we have to live in it. What can those who study the past genuinely contribute to our future?

If the clash of civilizations is a proper analytical tool, as I have maintained, based upon historical entities whose past behavior might provide guidelines for the statesmen of the future, then the historian might indeed have a major contribution to make to the future, to one’s nation (or civilization), potentially even to peace or war.

What is the relation and nature of prediction to historical study? The historian E.H. Carr provides a timely and more informed critique:

¹⁶ Hegel, The Philosophy of History, p. 115.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 54.

“The clue to the question of prediction in history lies in this distinction between the general and the specific, between the universal and the unique. The historian, as we have seen, is bound to generalize; and, in so doing, he provides general guidelines for future action which, though not specific predictions, are both valid and useful.”¹⁹

Historians can never forget the uniqueness of each historical situation; they can see parallels, they can promote principles (if not “laws”) of action, but the independent circumstances of each situation makes each situation its own unique problem. This does not mean that the past is irrelevant or extraneous; simply that it must be understood in context.

The methodology of historical analysis used for predictive possibilities has deep similarities with Western scientific method, but historical knowledge cannot be replicated like laboratory experiments. Rather, the state of our knowledge of the past is always changing, and historical causation is multiple and complex. There is often new information or new, shifting paradigms and perspectives on the old existing structures that come to light with our constant re-examination and thinking of historical issues. As John Gaddis succinctly notes: “Historians work with limited, not universal, generalizations.”²⁰ And the human material out of which history is made is the most generalized and complex of all materials, reducing all conceptions down the specific individuals who act in history. The cultural historian Jacques Barzun cautions:

“To begin with, cause in history cannot be ascertained any better than motive in its human agents. Both must be represented as probable, and it is wiser to speak of *conditions* rather than causes and of *influences* rather than a force making for change, because what brings it about is the human will, which is distributed amongst all the living.”²¹

So prediction in history is at best a cautionary tale. Understanding the role of human nature, the individual and the political leader is heightened, beyond any historical system or any political interpretation of the future. What good is history to prediction if it must be parsed, qualified and atomized as to become inapplicable?

We should not easily discourage. As Carr noted, “Good historians, I suspect, whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones.”²² We live in a world today where

¹⁹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 87.

²⁰ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, p. 63.

²¹ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 654.

²² Carr, *What is History?*, p. 143.

many anticipate a clash of civilizations, increased political violence across the 21st century. Historians cannot predict or prevent events or trends out of hand. However, the subject matter of history remains our best guide to what projected pathways into the future may unfold. Perhaps Gaddis best concluded the relationship between history and prediction: “Studying the past is no sure guide to predicting the future. What it does do, though, is to *prepare* you for the future by expanding experience, so that you can increase your skills, your stamina- and, if all goes well, your wisdom.”²³

It is this idea that I would like to next address—the future of Western civilization within the concept of a coming 21st century clash of civilizations, and the best intellectual weapon we thinkers have for dealing with this, the path to wisdom and a new historical humanism.

V. Scientific and Historical Method

As we face the future, the material and technological abundance of the West is the feature most respected, resented, and coveted by challenger civilizations. Our prosperity has reached astounding heights because Western civilization has freed the minds of individuals to imagine and explore all areas of knowledge about our world. The scientific method of hypothesis, experiment, questioning, confirming and advancing by degrees our knowledge based upon past results has given us the current state of humankind’s detailed knowledge of nature. Notice I do not say mastery over nature. Nature has many secrets and events hidden away, as Einstein learned from his failure to elicit a unified field theory, or as a Louisiana resident who lived through Hurricane Katrina can confirm. But we do have an unprecedented knowledge of the world, of ourselves, how it all works—and now, over the past fifteen years, we have spiraling communications systems which bring that knowledge into virtually every Western household at the push of a button. This abundance and availability of knowledge is an extraordinary state of affairs.

History, how we think and learn about the past, is deeply intertwined with the scientific method by which we have discovered these truths of nature. For history encompasses all thought, all nature, all reality as it has existed up to the present time. Our historical

²³ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, p. 11.

consciousness, as John Lukacs has described it, is what makes the most successful voyagers of the mind into historians:

“ . . . history, for us, has become a form of thought.

This means that historical thinking may be applied- indeed, that we often apply it, consciously or otherwise- to every kind of human experience. We can describe and, consequently, understand a person, a nation, any kind of human society, virtually any kind of human endeavor, not only through their material or spiritual, their physical or psychic characteristics but through their history. The character of a person will best appear not so much from information of his physical or psychic properties as from what we know of the history of his life; the same is true of a character of a nation. The history of a problem, of an idea, of a concept, of a theory may reveal its evolving diagnosis. There is no field of human action that that may not be approached, studied, described, and understood through its history.”²⁴

Historical thinking, or thinking and learning from a historical sense, is the key to the development of the Western civilization which we inherit, share and enjoy today. We stand on the shoulders of all our forbearers, giants and ants alike, who stood on other shoulders before them; any new humanistic understanding of our world will emerge from this historical development.

This is not to say that history isn't shaped by the intuitive genius or rebel. Anyone familiar with the history of the rise of modern physics in the first half of the twentieth century knows that Albert Einstein rebelled against accepted ideas of the day, and acceptance of his new and radical concepts was slow. But other thinkers such as Max Planck and Henri Poincare also came close to realizing the truth of the theory of relativity—they simply could not take the final steps, resolve the contradictions that they saw through re-prioritizing their methods and principles. But when breakthroughs occur, we expand knowledge by building upon the breakthroughs, by an exertion of the creative energy of many.

The Western scientific method and the Western study of history have deep links in this tradition. The historian William H. McNeill once described his historical methodology before a group of social and natural scientists. Reluctantly, McNeill described how he read all he could on his subject matter, redefined the problems and then redirected his research efforts, came to a

²⁴ John Lukacs, Historical Consciousness (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1968, fourth edition 2004), p. 5-6.

balanced sense of the old and new materials, and then wrote it up. When the social scientists objected that this was not a scientific method, a physicist noted that this how physics was done.²⁵ The great advances of nineteenth century science in biology and geology were notable to historians not simply because Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell explained nature more clearly, but also because they were basing their science upon a historical record and incorporating historical consciousness and thinking, ideas concerning development and change over time, into their sciences.²⁶ It is in methodology that history and physics offer insights into the other: historians and astrophysicists study existing structures and evidence, much of it incomplete or even contradictory, and cannot replicate historical or physical events inside of perfectly controlled laboratory conditions. Rather, logic and imagination must be employed along with the existing evidence within “thought experiments” to best explain and comprehend events.²⁷

What Gaddis brilliantly points out is that history should be used by us today much as cartographers use and create maps. Maps of the past, or maps of time, are similar to maps of land or continents. Just as one cannot replicate an entire country, every blade of grass in a natural landscape, in exact reproduction- and such a map might not be of use or profitable to a person seeking to traverse that landscape- so maps of time and the past give guidelines on how we functionally travel from point A to point B. Maps can zoom in and zoom out, concentrate on greater details or locales of already familiar territories, provide new and unique viewpoints of the familiar.²⁸ So it is with history. And so it is with Huntington’s clash thesis—it is a map to a potential future.

But if we are to accept history as a map of the past which might provide clues to Huntington’s map of the future, it should be noted that these concepts are results of a particular culture, the Western civilization, in the world. Not everyone will abide by the same maps or historical and political ideas. The Western method of science and history has definite values and meaning for the future. As John Lukacs has noted, “There exist, after all, practical consequences of the Western idea of truth.”²⁹ If our concept of truth is to survive, the civilization which has produced it must be defended, not just physically, militarily or politically, but also in moral and intellectual terms.

²⁵ Gaddis, The Landscape of History, p. 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁸ For a fuller discussion, please refer to *Ibid.*, p. 26-34.

²⁹ Lukacs, Historical Consciousness, p. 26.

This presents great opportunities for historians today. As E.H. Carr noted in 1961, “Great history is written precisely when the historian’s vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present.”³⁰ Our insights into the present and developing future of the clash of civilizations should now be put in the context of our Western civilization, and the unique values it holds that have created our modern world.

VI. The Western Meaning of History

The concept of the future of the world as an open entity, undetermined and unpredictable, is central to our Western civilization. Our world history, with its rise and fall of nations and civilizations, its triumphs and its tragedies, opens before the terrifying prospect that there is no meaning to it all—no meaning to the human world, no meaning to history, no meaning to life in either a communal or individual nature. With their historical endurance in cultural and political formats, it is the power of civilizations to give historical meaning to their members: individuals learn that meaning is the further endurance of their religion, state, or form of civilization as it always has been. The West has broken free of these forms in a unique manner. As the Oxford philosopher Karl Popper wrote most eloquently of the meaning of the West:

“We can interpret the history of power politics from the point of view of our fight for the open society, for a rule of reason, for justice, freedom, equality, and for the control of international crime. Although history has no ends, we can impose these ends upon it; and although history has no meaning, we can give it a meaning.”³¹

I would submit that in fact all civilizations seek to impose their own meaning upon the past; it is a human condition. What is unique about Western civilization is its value system concerning the dignity and rights of the individual, his or her freedom to determine their own paths to happiness and meaning within political and economic systems that promote an equality of opportunity for these ends.

The advanced state of this Western condition is a relatively recent and exceptional thing. “People forget what a remarkable thing it is that in our countries we have such rights and liberties. Civilizations have existed for thousands of years in which there was no trace of the

³⁰ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 44.

³¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Hegel and Marx* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 278.

mere idea of criticizing the government, of being secure from arbitrary arrest, of having a fair trial (or even a fairish trial, or even a trial at all), of printing almost anything one likes, of voting for one of a number of candidates for public office,” writes the great historian of the Soviet Union, Robert Conquest, at the end of a lifetime in which his subject matter vigorously suppressed these ideas.³² Fleshing out Popper’s principle in a positive example, E.H. Carr wrote that Lincoln’s words in the Gettysburg Address were “-a unique event- the first occasion in history when men deliberately and consciously formed themselves into a nation, and then consciously and deliberately set out to mould other men into it.”³³

The key to the Western meaning of history is precisely this prescience, this consciousness of the moment, the grasping of change and new direction which imbues meaning to the event. “Modern man is to an unprecedented degree self-conscious and therefore conscious of history,” notes Carr.³⁴ In the West, we act, and we create ourselves—we act in the creation of our own history, our own meaning, our own self-fulfillment. Similar to other civilizations, previously the West maintained a religious inheritance. The Christian religion maintains a unique historical conception of itself with its promise of Christ’s return and reign in the world; while not rejecting this conception, the Renaissance brought humankind back into the center of the world affairs. But as Lukacs notes, “Yet historical consciousness is still something specifically ‘Western.’”³⁵ Western civilization has expanded across the globe, interacting and blending with other civilizations since the sixteenth century, but the Western sense of historical knowledge remains intact and different from the concept of history employed by other civilizations.

This Western historical consciousness has weakened of its own success in the last century. The Modern Era staged an unprecedented material prosperity as scientific and technological innovation swept across the twentieth century, but it has come at the price of undermined moral certainties and political division within Western nations. Einstein’s and Picasso’s discoveries in the sciences and arts brought into play the idea that ultimate reality was beyond the sense perception of humans.³⁶ With the slide into world war, disintegration of European empires, economic depression, totalitarian political systems, and an even more

³² Robert Conquest, Reflections on a Ravaged Century (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000), p. 20.

³³ Carr, What is History?, p. 180.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

³⁵ Lukacs, Historical Consciousness, p. 23.

³⁶ For the changing values of the modern era, see Arthur I. Miller, Einstein/Picasso (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

destructive second world war, the political centrality of Western civilization and its dominance in the world has clearly lessened across the twentieth century. This loss of position by Western civilization within the world is a constant theme of writers from Oswald Spengler to Niall Ferguson today, and not without merit or truth.³⁷ Indeed, Huntington's thesis might be part of this tapestry of historical writing.

Yet as Huntington notes, the West still maintains a priority in world affairs today; our science and technology, open political and economic systems, produce results which other societies and civilizations wish to emulate. The cautionary is that we know through history that it is possible to lose our knowledge, our civilization, all that we have attained. Technology has created the possibility to literally destroy a civilization through nuclear violence. But we in the West know that civilization can be collapsed from within because we have experienced it. We have seen it before, in Gibbon's Rome, Tuchman's calamitous fourteenth century, or in modern times in Conquest's Soviet Union or Kershaw's Germany.

The anticipated clash of civilizations will not be over the merits of the West, but over the undesirable products or by-products which come with these Western systems. Huntington makes clear where the fault lines are: "The dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Sinic assertiveness."³⁸ But again, this is not a new phenomenon. Traditions of openness of mind and freedom of thought bring intellectual and moral clashes. The supreme value of the Western tradition is that humanity may work out better answers for our future happiness. What we in the West must come towards today is our recognition that there are competing value systems which may produce desired or good results in the ends, but that the Western means must be defended.

The Oxford political philosopher Isaiah Berlin put his finger on the heart of the dilemma facing the West. He famously contrasted the differences of "freedom from" compared to "freedom to" in his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." Berlin noted that there were two conceptions of liberty with deep reverberations for individuals (and thus, the societies and civilizations in which they live). First was the notion of "negative freedom:" this entailed that "Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by

³⁷ For reference, please see Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006, abridged edition) and Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

³⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, p. 183.

others.”³⁹ Negative liberty is the Western tradition, in which political systems attempt to establish legal boundaries within which individuals might determine their own paths, so long as they do not suppress or intervene in the paths of others seeking their own visions of fulfillment. Spengler himself noted that between the Chinese, Arabian and Western civilizations, that “Freedom is, as always, purely *negative*.”⁴⁰ In this light, negative liberty might be the foundational value for a New Humanism and understanding between these civilizations to manage the anticipated political clashes of the coming century. In contrast to this idea is the concept of “positive liberty:” in this matter, freedom “derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master.”⁴¹ In consequence, this freedom allows the individual to pursue whatever he or she desires, even at the cost of the liberty of others, or their destruction.

Since the beginning of the Renaissance, this tension has been present in Western philosophy and Western civilization. Machiavelli was the first writer to point out the problem for Western civilization. He noted that freedom for Western civilization was ultimately a negative freedom. As Berlin noted of Machiavelli: “The only freedom he recognizes is political freedom from arbitrary despotic rule, that is, republicanism, and the freedom of one State from control by other States . . .”⁴² In his time, Machiavelli was seeking to discuss the value of the good prince who builds a state, such as the Romans, and the good man who lives by Christian morality. He comes to the conclusion that the two cannot be reconciled in the same man, but may coexist within the same society. In this division, Berlin notes, “. . . what he institutes is something that cuts deeper still- a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life, and therefore two moralities.”⁴³ What it is important to recognize in Machiavelli is that he does not deny that Christian ideals are good—far from it. He confirms that both Christian and the pagan Roman virtues of the state are both good. How does one choose?

In a Western philosophy and civilization in which the free play of minds and individuals is held as an ideal, seeking the good life for people and societies, it was assumed that all good values must align into one whole or greater good, that there could not be conflicting good values. The incompatibility of Christian virtues such as meekness, charity, sacrifice, and love of God with the old Roman pagan virtues of courage, vigor, order, discipline, strength and public

³⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in The Proper Study of Mankind, p. 194.

⁴⁰ Spengler, The Decline of the West, p. 392.

⁴¹ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” p. 203.

⁴² Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in The Proper Study of Mankind, p. 281.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

achievement force Western citizens to make a choice between the two. Part of the notoriety of Machiavelli is that he freely acknowledges that he prefers the old Roman way. As Berlin puts it:

“Machiavelli calls the bluff not just of official morality- the hypocrisies of ordinary life- but of one of the foundations of the central Western philosophical tradition, the belief in the ultimate compatibility of all genuine values.”⁴⁴

This tension has existed within Western civilization for the past five centuries and is still with us today. In a 21st century world in which a clash of civilizations is anticipated, this recognition is a starting point for how the Western and world future might evolve. Other societies hold genuine values which might deeply conflict with other civilizations—this is Huntington’s thesis. Keeping conflict between those values systems short of warfare between political actors must start with this recognition that good ends might differ between civilizations. But what if others do not recognize this conundrum—that others hold creditable and good value systems whose ends might be different or incompatible? Does violence and destruction of the other then become the only option?

Many in the West desire to acknowledge the acceptance of multiple models for future world development (note the multicultural movement, more of which will be discussed later). But Western acceptance of other paths, overcoming the arrogance against which Huntington warned, does not guarantee a peaceful future or that other cultures will still not seek to impose their models upon others. “Toleration is historically the product of the realization of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of complete victory of one over the other,” observed Berlin.⁴⁵ He also noted that men and cultures that seek to impose their singular vision or models in a universal context, even while this cohesion might provide a temporary strength or unity, are usually broken “by reality- experienced events.”⁴⁶ In other words, history becomes the determining agent, and history is made by individual human beings. The efforts of thinkers or cultures to impose universal value systems upon the world, either political or intellectual, have never succeeded. Berlin notes of these attempts: “They failed over politics because our political notions are part of our conception of what it is to be human . . .”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 324.

⁴⁶ Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” in The Proper Study of Mankind, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

Expanding our ideas about what it is to be human must be central to our study of history, and to our future. Human beings are endlessly complex, but understanding their value systems and the civilizations they produce is the first step to understanding the governments and political actors that will determine the future of our world and politically manage that future. The West must recognize that moral relativism which makes no distinctions between moralities and the people and civilizations which hold these values cannot sustain a future world order. If it is doubtful that all human value systems can be reconciled, then the best that can be done is to clearly recognize differences. From this point, political actors and leaders might be able to deal with each other short of violence; or if violent confrontation over values is inescapable, then leaders might best prepare to protect their peoples from what is to come.

But with the recognition of these differences and commonalities, the 21st century may start to see the rise of a “New Humanism” with historical consciousness as its foundation. The historian John Lukacs has already noted the rise of a New Humanism with the admonition: “We know, *to some extent*, what is happening to our civilization- and this is something that our ancestors at the time of the Renaissance or at the end of the ancient world did not know. There are great potential dangers latent in this intellectual condition: for the notion of inevitability furthers the very progress of something that seems inevitable.”⁴⁸ In our regarding the anticipated clash of civilizations, the shape of a “New Humanism” might already be taking shape through our self-knowledge and expectation of the future—a good example is Pope Benedict XVI’s previously mentioned attempt to open a dialogue with Islam based upon rational and cultural conceptions of humankind.⁴⁹

The clash of civilizations can be managed politically; how well remains to be determined. But the West must stand up for its own historical value system. If we wish to avoid conquest, if we wish for Western civilization to maintain its freedoms at the best, and to survive in the worst case scenario, we must face up to our internal weaknesses as well.

XII. The Clash of Civilizations: The West and History

The future is of course yet to be determined, no matter what history and prediction indicate for us. There is no way through the future but to live it. A collision of values should not

⁴⁸ Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Please refer again to Samir Khalil Samir, “Benedict XVI and Islam,” www.asianews.it, February 9, 2007.

be feared by the West; it is through the re-examination and testing of our ideas and institutions that the Western civilization has reached its historical position within the world. That strife should be part of our past, present and future is to be expected; as Berlin again notes the real mark and recognition of Machiavelli is not his advice to princes, but his claim that: “. . . ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that this happens not merely in exceptional circumstances . . . but (this was surely new) as part of the normal human situation.”⁵⁰ The clash of civilizations is not new; it has been inherent in the world all along. We have been through such terrain before, and it is important as scholars that we make our fellow citizens aware of that history.

Where we must be concerned today is our commitment to our own Western civilization. The weakness of the West in facing the 21st century is in our own lack of historical consciousness. We are strengthened by our questing for truths, but we must be willing to face these truths where we find them and live up to our best values, even when unpleasant, and adjust ourselves accordingly. As Fukuyama notes, “But in a democracy, we are fundamentally adverse to saying that a certain person, or way of life, or activity, is better or more worthwhile than another.”⁵¹ Multiculturalism in the West has helped promote tolerance and diversity of values within democratic societies. However, it must be noted that multiculturalism might only work within a framework where a central or core culture is accepted by all the citizens involved- a core democratic culture. Without primary allegiance to the core democratic culture, to the idea of democracy centered upon the individual citizen, then a nation with many different cultures asserting group rights will fall apart into competing sectors. As Huntington himself writes, “History shows that no country so constituted can long endure as a coherent society. A multicivilizational United States will not be the United States; it will be the United Nations.”⁵² Huntington also quotes James Kurth, who noted that “the real clash” most of us in the West experience today is between the proponents of multiculturalism and the traditions of Western civilization.⁵³

⁵⁰ Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in The Proper Study of Mankind, p. 320.

⁵¹ Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man, p. 303.

⁵² Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, p. 306.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

E.H. Carr noted that “progress in history, unlike evolution in nature, rests on the transmission of acquired assets.”⁵⁴ So how are we historians doing our jobs in the West today? Not as well as we should be. In summer 2007, according to ABC news, the British government approved a history syllabus in which Winston Churchill was absented.⁵⁵ It should be noted that mention of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and other notables were neglected as well; but as a scholar who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Second World War economy, this doesn’t provide one with relief of how that event is being taught to our young people. Shortly before that item appeared, the former Secretary of Education in the United States, William J. Bennett, wrote an article which identified the same problem within American history teaching to our young: “politically correct” narratives which cast the American story in the most negative light possible, and as the coup d’grace, were “boring” to students. Achievements, struggles, and individual stories have been excised from our national histories; we are not passing along our acquired assets. Bennett quotes the American historian David McCullough’s testimony to our Congress: “Amnesia of society is just as detrimental as amnesia for the individual. We are running a terrible risk. Our very freedom depends upon education, and we are failing our children in not providing that education.”⁵⁶ This is where scholars are in the front lines of the clash of civilizations.

What this writer recognizes in these anecdotes is our professional failure to humanize history. In my personal experience teaching history, I have discovered that one thing interests people more than anything else: other people. I have found most success in reaching students by asking them to imagine what it would be like to be a historical figure such as Winston Churchill, George Washington, Abigail Adams, Frederick Douglass, or even try to occupy the mind of those we do not morally admire, such as an American slave owner or Albert Speer, and ask them to envision what choices they might have made at those times, in those imagined places. It is through historical thinking and reasoning that our students learn moral complexity and the importance of their own choices to their own history. Calls for educational reform in the West are surfacing. Earlier this year, the scholar Charles Murray published a piece in which he urged the adoption of new educational standards for gifted students, those who the West can expect to

⁵⁴ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 155.

⁵⁵ Please see “Churchill Dropped from England’s History Syllabus,” www.abc.net.au, posted July 13, 2007

⁵⁶ Please refer to William J. Bennett, “Our National Alienation and Amnesia,” www.nationalreview.com, June 29, 2007.

become leaders of our societies and civilization. He identifies wisdom as the goal of this education with particular emphasis upon two areas of study: wisdom requires “being steeped in the study of ethics” and it “requires an advanced knowledge of history.”⁵⁷

It is not that historians should seek to undeservedly glorify the West, or to denigrate others. Part of being human and wise is recognizing that all humans have faults. But if we are to straighten our faults and become better, or advance ourselves towards a New Humanism, then we must also recognize our strengths, and use our inheritance and historical consciousness. Thomas Jefferson is famed for his advice that education should be “chiefly historical,” and justified his reasoning thus:

“History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”⁵⁸

Notice: to defeat mistaken views. History is not meant to simply be a parlor game for intellectuals. Battles moral and intellectual must be engaged, and it matters how these issues are settled. The stakes for knowing our history are much higher than is commonly appreciated, and if we are to benefit, our “dragons of expectation” concerning our own futures must be properly tempered with where we have been. As the great Robert Conquest wrote, “For unlike with the other arts, major errors in history entering much or any, of the public mind, can be dangerous.”⁵⁹ This is why historians must arise to the task of performing their work at the highest levels in the future.

VIII. Our Historical Task: History and a New Humanism

If our historians do not do a better job of communicating and respecting our Western our values and our traditions of historical study in the 21st century, if we don’t redouble our efforts in the anticipated clash of civilizations, then we stand a real chance of ultimately losing our inheritance. Historians in the West must be in the front ranks of democratic principles. As

⁵⁷ Please see Charles Murray, “Aztecs vs. Greeks,” in the Wall Street Journal, www.opinionjournal.com, January 18, 2007.

⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia as found in Merrill D. Petersen, editor, The Portable Jefferson (New York: Viking Penguin, 1975), p. 198.

⁵⁹ Robert Conquest, The Dragons of Expectation (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), p. 206.

usual, history provides us with lessons. At the dawn of the new millennium in 2000, with his eye on the recently deceased century and Soviet Union, Robert Conquest wrote that “The survival of civilization in the twentieth century was a near thing. And the perils were greatly exacerbated by unreal thinking within the democratic culture itself . . . Democratic muddleheadedness, or a resurgence of fanaticism, could destroy the present opportunity.”⁶⁰ So we find the same echoes in our world today.

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be,” wrote Thomas Jefferson.⁶¹ The historical task which the West and historians should define for itself going in the 21st century is to morally and intellectually defend our civilization upon a foundation of an enlarged or New Humanism that will encompass and transcend all civilizations without foregoing our most cherished and hard won values. I believe that a century hence the outcome of Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations will ultimately depend upon our own view of ourselves and our Western history. The future will be won in the minds of our politicians, soldiers and citizens, who must be educated on what is at stake if we expect them to defend our values. Historians and scholars must seek a wider audience, and be in the front ranks of our civilization’s defense.

It will of course not be an easy road, and for the honest, there will be pain about the past and about our human nature. But within human nature, there is also honor, courage, bravery, and achievement. We should draw attention to these stories, and revere these qualities in our ancestors when we see the best within them from afar. We should not be ashamed of these values, but promote them within the world. These are values that transcend civilizations. There are many new ways that technology can allow historians to reach a broader audience, but the important thing is what we have to say to our audience. We must be excited to communicate and teach our Western values.

The great scholar John Lewis Gaddis wrote of the responsibilities of our historical profession that what scholars must do for themselves, their students, their countries and civilizations is to primarily and effectively teach:

“What you hope for, as a result of such teaching, is a present and future upon which the past rests gracefully, rather as it does within the city of Oxford. I mean by this a society prepared to respect the

⁶⁰ Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, p. xiv-xv.

⁶¹ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Cabell, September 9, 1817, “An Act for Establishing Elementary Schools.”

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past while holding it accountable, a society less given to uprooting than to retrofitting, a society that values a moral sense over moral insensibility. Historical consciousness may not be the only way to build such a society; but just as, within the realm of non-reflexive entities, the scientific method has shown itself more capable of other modes of inquiry in commanding the widest possible consensus, so the historical method may occupy a similarly advantageous position when it comes to human affairs.”⁶²

The West is a unique civilization because of this sense of the quest which emanates across our literature, art, science, our travels to different lands and establishment and dismantlement of empires—across our entire history and being. Our historical awareness of what we have done, how we create our lives and world, and brand them with meaning, is our link to the future.

With our questing goes self-examination and questioning of what is the truth and what is morally right. This has led us to mistakes; but keep in mind this same questing spirit has led us to correct our mistakes. As we anticipate the 21st century and the expected political clashes amongst civilizations, historical consciousness must be the framework of mind that enables us to endure and transcend our times into a better world. This combination of questing and consciousness is how we as historians and scholars give meaning to our lives and our work, how we may contribute to a brighter humanistic understanding of our world, and why we matter to the future.

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⁶² Gaddis, The Landscape of History, p. 149.