

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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THE ENEMY WITHIN

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Late last year, I wrote an article entitled "It Just Doesn't Get Any Better Than This" (December 7, 1994), in which I argued that few nations in the entire history of the world have experienced the kind of unrivaled international economic and military superiority that the U.S. enjoys today. I noted that I didn't think this happy state would go on forever, and said that I would review in a future piece what some top foreign policy thinkers view as the principle long-term threat to the continuation of today's geo-political "good times."

In a follow-up article, "The West V. The Confucian-Islamic Connection" (February 1, 1995), I presented some of the views of the esteemed Harvard political science professor, Samuel Huntington, as set forth in an article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations," which appeared in the Summer, 1993 issue of "Foreign Affairs." My piece on Huntington was so long that there wasn't room to offer the views of anyone else, so I promised to address the subject further at a later date. So here we are.

I will begin with some ideas put forth by Swarthmore College political science professor James Kurth in a fascinating article entitled "The Real Clash," which appeared in the Fall, 1994 issue of *The National Interest*. Responding to Huntington, Kurth argues that the principle threat to U.S. economic and military superiority is internal. As he puts, "the real clash of civilizations will not be between the West and one or more of the Rest. It will be between the West and the post-West within the West itself."

"At the very moment of its greatest triumph, its defeat of the last great power opposing it, Western civilization is becoming non-Western," Kurth claims. He argues that this severe and on-going cultural breakdown raises the serious question of whether anyone will believe strongly enough in the United States to "fight, kill and die" for it, when and if Huntington's "clash of civilizations" ever actually occurs.

Kurth agrees with Huntington that China and Islam could someday directly challenge U.S. interests. But he doesn't take this threat as seriously as Huntington. He believes that Iran is the

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only candidate to become a "core state for the Islamic civilization." But, he says, this would be virtually impossible due to the fact that Iran is largely isolated from the rest of the Islamic world by its Shi'ite theology, its Persian ethnicity, and temporarily at least, its dismal economy. Other large Islamic states, such as Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia, are, he says, so different from, and so contemptuous of, each other that no concerted policy toward the West or toward other civilization groups is possible.

This lack of political cohesion within Islam, he says, makes it likely that the clash between Western societies and Islamic groups will manifest in a long series of terrorist actions, border skirmishes and ethnic wars, rather than taking place at the level of conventional or nuclear wars.

As for China, Kurth maintains that before there is a clash between Western and Confucian civilizations, "sometime soon there will intervene a clash between the communist past and the Confucian future in China itself." The great transition from being a communist state to being a Confucian one is not going to be a smooth and easy process, Kurth argues, adding that the nature of this clash "will largely shape the nature and timing of the external one."

A clash of civilizations that occurs after a long Chinese "time of troubles" would have different consequences than one that occurs in the near future, he says. "In any event, the clash between Western and Confucian civilization, like the clash between Western and Islamic civilization, is not likely to take place at the level of conventional or nuclear wars. Rather, it will more likely take place between Western-style or liberal capitalism and Confucian-style or state-guided capitalism, as a long series of economic conflicts, human rights disputes with an economic dimension, and trade wars."

Implicit in Kurth's argument is that no matter what the Confucian and Islamic civilizations do, Western civilization can handle it, so long as there is a Western civilization around to do so. But he fears that virtually all the core beliefs and values that define and unite Western civilization are rapidly losing their meaning. Indeed, he argues that the U.S. political and intellectual elites no longer think of America as even a member of Western civilization, much less its leader. In much of the academic world, he says, "Western civilization is seen as an oppressive hegemony that should be overturned."

Kurth points out that 300 years ago, the term used to define "the West," was "Christendom." The French revolution and the industrial revolution spread Enlightenment ideas and secularization, and by the early part of the 20th "Christendom" had become "Western civilization."

This term, he says, "registered the awareness that this civilization, unlike others, did not place religion at its core." Christianity continued as a "vital force" within the civilization, but the civilization itself was anchored on a unique blend of largely secular ideas and values, including the rule of law, separation of church and state, the sanctity of the individual and of property rights, and a plethora of moral habits, beliefs, conventions and customs.

The history of what Kurth views as the decline of this Western civilization is long and complicated. He believes it is closely linked to the transformation of America to a post-industrial society. This was caused by the globalization of the economy, which forced the movement of manufacturing jobs off shore. He offers the following chronology.

“The agricultural economy was one that employed both men and women. They were, it is true, employed at different tasks, but they worked at the same place, the farm, which was also the home. The industrial economy largely employed men. They worked both at different tasks from those of women and at a different place, the factory, which was away from the home. The service economy is like the agricultural economy in that it employs both men and women. But it employs them at much the same tasks and at the same place, the office. Like the industrial economy, that place is away from the home. These simple differences in tasks and place have had and will continue to have enormous consequences for society.”

The movement in the second half of the 19th century of men from farm to factory, Kurth says, helped create "many of the political movements that shaped the history of the time -- socialism and anti-socialism, revolutions, and civil wars." This culminated in the first half of the 20th century with the Communist revolution in Russia, the National Socialist reaction in Germany, and the Second World War that included the great struggle between the two."

In the second half of the 20th century, Kurth says, the enormously significant movement of women from home to office is beginning to shape the history of our time. The changes that will occur from this movement may not, he says, "take the form of revolutions, civil wars, and world wars," as did the earlier movement of men from farm to factory. But they will be of tremendous consequence, nevertheless. Among other things, he points out that these changes are helping to bring about the replacement of the nuclear family with the "non-traditional" family, which "like the splitting of the atom's nucleus, will release an enormous amount of energy."

He argues that "some indication of that energy, and its direction, may be gleaned from the behavior of the children of split families or single-parent families, especially where they have reached a critical mass forming more than half the population, as in the large cities of America. In such locales, there is not much evidence of 'Western civilization' or even of civility. For thousands of years, the city was the source of civilization. In contemporary America, however, it has become the source of barbarism."

Another manifestation of the enormous change being wrought by the shift to a post-industrial economy is a political/cultural war between those who view this change as liberating and wish to hurry it and those who want to halt it, or at least slow it down. The resulting new political movements are, he says, already beginning to shape the history of our time.

On one side are feminism and multiculturalism, which Kurth notes are closely intertwined. Together, he says, these movements provide the political energy for today's liberalism. Both, he says, despise Western civilization as being male dominated and secured by the writings of "dead white European males." Indeed, Kurth says that the feminist movement is "central to the multicultural coalition and its project. It provides the numbers, having reached a central mass first in academia and now in the media and the law. It promotes the theories, such as deconstructivism and post-modernism. And it provides much of the energy, the leadership and the political clout." On the other side, there is emerging a new form of conservatism, which is referred to by its adversaries as "the religious right." This group, Kurth says, is the principle energy source for the right.

Neither these new liberals nor these new conservatives are, Kurth says, believers in Western civilization. "The liberals identify with multicultural society or a post-Western civilization (such as it is). The conservatives identify with Christianity, or a pre-Western civilization."

And therein, according to Kurth, lies a greater danger to Western civilization than any threat from the outside. Kurth points out that the "combination of American energy and European imagery gave the idea of Western civilization both power and legitimacy," and this power, he says, helped the U.S. win both the Second World War and the Cold War, and "to order the long peace within Western Europe that was so much intertwined with that Cold War." Western civilization has thus experienced its own heroic age. But he notes, "that age is now over."

I will turn now briefly to an elegant and lengthy article entitled "What To Do About National Defense," by Eliot A. Cohen, professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. As indicated by the title, Cohen's article, which appeared in the November 1994 issue of *Commentary*, is an exposition on the U.S. military. It is not a response to Huntington, and does not specifically attempt to divine the future course of American geopolitics. But it contains some fascinating ideas that I feel are germane to the topic at hand. So here goes.

Like Kurth, Cohen is deeply concerned that America's on-going cultural breakdown will have serious long-term effects on national security. Among other things, he says, this breakdown has induced U.S. leaders to turn their attention inward, "in an attempt to cope with a society that has lost much of its self-confidence." He points out, for example, that the 1992 presidential election campaign was the first since 1936 that did not feature foreign affairs as a prominent issue.

What these inward-looking politicians are finding, he says, is a nation where the "foreign-policy establishment continues to hold earnest seminars on policy vis-à-vis countries 10,000 miles away while ten blocks away thugs have driven all but the pluckiest, most foolhardy, or heavily armed citizens from the street." Indeed, he says, "the contrast between the formidable military power of the United States and its violent and disorderly cities suggests the hubris of an ambitious effort to police the world." As a result, the American public is beginning to look askance at foreign adventures "that aim to do for others what we have not yet done for ourselves."

Just as importantly, Cohen notes, "the diseases afflicting American civilization have not escaped the notice of other nations." As a result, "we may have passed the high-water mark of the spread of American culture around the world, as the United States finds itself increasingly at odds with countries resentful of our attempts to impose a world order that to them looks far from benign or attractive." In a nutshell, his thoughts on this important subject are as follows.

"Americans tend to discount the cultural hostility of foreign intellectuals and politicians as mere window-dressing. In particular, many American intellectuals shrug off religious belief as a passing obstacle to the development of secular, humanistic, and libertarian societies. Living as we do in the oldest constitutional democracy on the planet, we often assume that American ways -- our package of individual liberties and a legalistic political system -- must inevitably spread to all countries. These American assumptions will probably fail in the next century. They not only attract the anger of fundamentalist groups in the Islamic world; they have also begun to elicit hostile reactions from other societies, including the far more successful states of Asia."

"Indeed," Cohen says, "in what may be the greatest strategic revolution of all, two concepts that the United States itself applied to the Soviet Union -- deterrence and containment -- may be applied to it. Other countries (plus substate and transnational actors) may seek not to contend with the United States for global hegemony, but to keep it out of their spheres of interest and influence." In such struggles, Cohen says, "even modest amounts of force" by adversaries, "if wielded dexterously and with determination, can thwart the objectives of a morose, and troubled American giant."

Another major thrust of Cohen's article deals with his concern that America will make the wrong choices about how much it should spend on its military and what it should buy. Space does not permit a discussion of his specific concerns and proposals. But the following paragraph, I think, is instructive, and in keeping with the theme of this article, i.e., what could go wrong.

"Many small states will take from the Gulf war the lesson that the best counter to American conventional strength lies in the possession of a nuclear arsenal. To deter the use of such weapons (and, perhaps, chemical and biological ones as well), and if necessary to preempt nuclear forces, the United States will require a small but always modern nuclear force of its own. "This ultimately also requires a low-level testing-and-development program, particularly for tactical weapons. By failing to develop and publicly defend small, clean nuclear weapons that might be useful for preemptive destruction of the small, crude arsenals of potential enemies, the Clinton administration may be making one of its most damaging long-term mistakes."

I'd like to close with some thoughts from my good friend, Claus Ryn, a professor of Politics at Catholic University and author of one of my all-time favorite books, *The New Jacobins, Can Democracy Survive?* Ryn doesn't directly address the issue of where the principle threat to the United States may come. But in the introduction to a newly published book of essays by Irving Babbitt, entitled *Character & Culture*, he provides food for thought on Huntington's thesis.

"From a Babbittian point of view, such a risk [of growing tensions between cultures] does not necessarily arise from the higher cultures having different fundamental beliefs but is more likely to come from their failing to live up to their own highest moral and religious standards. If, in addition, they come under demagogic leadership, conflict is indeed likely. Under enlightened, cosmopolitan leadership, on the other hand, different cultures can repair to the deepest moral and religious insights of their respective traditions, which means drawing upon sources of restraint and moderation.

"Behind the particular belief systems lies a moral-spiritual core in which all of humanity participates, although in varying degrees. To direct attention to that core is to indicate the possibility of more harmonious contact between peoples and cultures." Let it be so!

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