

The Real Clash of Civilizations

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There is a real clash of civilizations in the world, but one that has little to do with East and West. It is found in the advanced world and consists in the values of traditional liberalism being attacked by the right wing. Nowhere is this battle noisier and of more consequence to the world's peoples than in America where victory for the right appears all but certain.

I have no quarrel with honest, decent conservatives. The essence of conservatism is the preservation of what is best from the past, the unwillingness to change what remains useful or valid just for the sake of change.

But all social and political arrangements are subject to change where there is economic growth. Old ways pass away, everything from the daily wearing of traditional garb and the absolute role of males to the average number of children and the selling of brides changes, sometimes in a single lifetime. Liberals differ from conservatives in being more ready to recognize this fundamental reality and to accommodate change in a timely way.

America's right wing is another matter altogether. Attitudes here go beyond conservatism into the shadowy realm of social Darwinism, selfishness exalted as virtue, muscular arrogance, and turning one's back on many aspects of enlightenment. These attitudes come embedded in an intense, almost religious, fervor.

When people read the word *Nazi* they first think of mass murder, and rightly so, but the Nazis had a set of beliefs and attitudes other than racial theories. In fact many Germans, and even party members, did not share Hitler's incandescent, almost inexplicable hatred of Jews, although anti-Semitism was very much a theme in German history, Martin Luther, for example, a remarkable man in so many respects, having said and written things every bit as vile as Hitler.

What were the characteristics of Nazism that might justify comparisons with influential contemporary groups in America?

As the title of Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, suggests, the Nazis viewed life as a struggle, embracing the idea that only the able should thrive and reproduce. It is helpful when you hold this belief if you also regard yourself as among the ablest, and so the Nazis did. Hitler was a social Darwinist with a mystical belief in the special merit of Germans.

The Nazis had an absolute loathing of Communism, or Bolshevism as it was called then, and contempt for all forms of liberalism and social democracy. All philosophies that offered hope against their vision of a world of successful predators prevailing over the weak were despised. Ruthlessness itself was held up by Hitler as a virtue because it could bring victory, or so he thought.

The Nazis were big-business capitalists, although political expediency had put *socialist* in the party name, but where issues of great national significance were concerned they never hesitated to redirect with subsidies, contracts, and other pressures the efforts of German industry. The Nazis encouraged the development of gigantic corporate entities. Small business was actually held in contempt by Hitler, hence his famous derisive comment about the British being a nation of shopkeepers. To support the Nazis' worship of military strength, only vast enterprises would do.

The Nazis were willing to accept a good deal of repression in their society if that guaranteed the success of their primary values, and, despite Germany's being in many ways one of the most advanced and cultured of European states, the Nazis were willing to tolerate floods of ignorant propaganda so long as it supported their aims.

Based on these criteria, it might be hard to distinguish America's extreme right from a good many Nazis, but I think the prefix *crypto* helpful in distinguishing them from their more straightforward cousins. For America does have a set of written ideals about human rights and freedoms at odds with Nazism, although these ideals have been interpreted with great flexibility or totally ignored over long periods of the country's history, often accommodating dark and brutal practices. Where the will to make good on constitutional promises does not exist, they remain fine words on parchment, as many wonderful-sounding third-world constitutions attest.

That is why the cypto-Nazis always attack the courts as unelected legislators when what the courts are mostly doing is the necessary job of deciding how to interpret grand general statements into the specific day-to-day circumstances of people's lives, and that under ever-changing circumstances. By the way, in the Nazis' early period, before they felt free to drag judges from their courts or murder them, they had exactly the same view of courts that dared to make unfriendly decisions.

The father of this contempt for courts in America was Thomas Jefferson who loathed the idea that the Supreme Court would interpret the Constitution's generalizations on behalf of the states. That is why he is the patron saint of America's crypto-Nazis. Jefferson was an expert at sounding high-minded while acting shabbily.

During the early Federalist period, Jefferson was ready to have Virginia secede — more than half a century before the rise of the Confederacy — over the issue of the Supreme Court's authority. Why? Because he understood the intrinsic conflict between a Bill of Rights and a society of aristocratic slaveholders, a democratic-sounding Constitution and a Virginia where about one percent of people could vote, and he was, despite all his high-sounding language, quite comfortable being an aristocratic slaveholder. The Bill of Rights sounded fine, but just don't set up anyone to interpret and enforce it.

Parts of America's right drift off into utter blindness and even phobic hatred. Jefferson to his dying day believed blacks were inferior, almost another species, and that women didn't merit the same education, and certainly not the same political privileges, as men. You don't find America's Aryan churches or weird militia groups or anti-gay organizations with liberals on their membership rolls. America's extreme right provided the vicious anti-Semites of American history — the founding males of many clans like the Fords or the Bushes — but they rule now in an odd partnership with the religious right whose eyes tear over with every mention of words like *Holy Land*, the *End of Time*, and *Armageddon*.

One of the major bonds tying them together is the fundamentalists' fear of social change. Fundamentalist minds seem fixed somewhere around 1840 or so as offering the ideal family and social arrangements, although they do enjoy suburban living, television, fast food, and SUVs, and not many of them have ten children or mail-order brides anymore. They see the never-ending pressure for change in American society — the inexorable result of long-term economic growth — as destructive to their vision of what society should be, and they are right, it is. This is why undefined blubber about „family values" joined the right-wing lexicon some years back. Ironically, the right wing's simplistic and enduring love for „the hell with regulations" economic growth, actually works against the long-term interests of fundamentalists, creating even greater future stresses on their vision of society, but few of them seem to understand this fact.

What of liberalism and its history in America? Although America rejected the idea of a king or lifetime president, taking what was a liberal view in the 18th century, the early Republic was effectively an aristocracy, an aristocracy of men with money, farms, and slaves rather than noble birth. It was the spirit of liberalism that gradually extended the franchise to include more than a small number of (male, white) property owners. It was the same spirit that gave the franchise to women and that made the United States Senate an elected rather than appointed, aristocratic body. It was liberalism that finally freed America's blacks from a second bondage, brutal apartheid in every detail, and gave them the franchise a century after the supposed end of slavery. It was liberalism that produced the great reforms of the Depression, creating hope and saving America from the brutal coups and civil wars of Europe during the troubled 1930s. It was liberalism that drove hope and progress for universal education. It was always liberalism pushing to make the tolerance for speech or religion promised in the Constitution into something tangible.

The mouthpieces for America's equivalent of the 1930s' Krupp or Farben — Rush Limbaugh, Anne Coulter, William F. Buckley, and dozens of others — are rarely seriously challenged over their sophomoric historical knowledge or their sneering jokes at hard-won human values. There appears to be a large appetite in America for re-cycled political garbage. The money supporting its production comes in truckloads. And there are truckloads, too, for phony institutes where ideologue-propagandists pose as academics, much like actors in white lab coats posing as doctors on ads for hemorrhoid relief. Money gushes like blood from opened arteries to support meaningless advertising's suffocation of genuine debate in American elections, and the George Will's of this world are paid handsomely to cover this naked display of power with arguments about free speech.

All the insensitivity and stupidity spewing over America's airwaves and carried in its newspapers does have an effect, as its sponsors intend that it should. Without any serious political opposition inside the country, America has launched two meaningless wars on weak nations, killing and maiming thousands of innocent people. It threatens still others and keeps prisoners in cages offshore. There is considerable public acceptance of barbarities like torture and assassination, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, inside the country are arrested and held with no access to courts or legal help. There is a vast increase in spying on your own people, and there is selective support for leaders of some countries no better than tyrants or murderers.

Meanwhile, "Hon, they've got a special on air conditioners down at the mall. Do you think we could drive down after the news?"

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