

# From Tragedy to Policy: Representations of Muslims and Islam in U.S. mainstream media



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**TRiO**

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# Introduction



- Following the end of the Cold War policymakers had difficulty assessing the post-Soviet world
- Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations theory resolved this confusion
  - Divided the world up into coherent parts
  - Created a definitive enemy/threat to the US
  - Self-fulfilling prophecy: Crusades, colonization of the Iberian Peninsula, turmoil between US and Middle East, etc.
- “The idea of a clash of civilizations is a sort of electric spark that sets people's imagination alight, because it finds fertile soil in which to proliferate.” – Bottici & Challand

# Introduction (Cont.)



- My thesis: *The mainstream U.S. media collectively adopted, in varying degrees, the Clash of Civilizations theory in its framing of Muslims and Islam following September 11*
- “Paradigms do not need to be true to become conventional wisdom.” —Ervand Abrahamian
  - The Clash of Civilizations theory was denounced heavily in the academic community as being too reductionist of an interpretation of the world

# Clash of Civilizations [Macro]



- World is divided into nine civilizations:
  - Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese
- “Instead of ‘East and West,’ it is more appropriate to speak of ‘the West and the rest,’ which at least implies the existence of many non-Wests.”
  - ‘The West’ is the locus [apex] of civilizations
- Juxtaposes ‘the West’ and Islam
  - Functions as the main thesis of Huntington’s argument

# Clash of Civilizations [Micro]



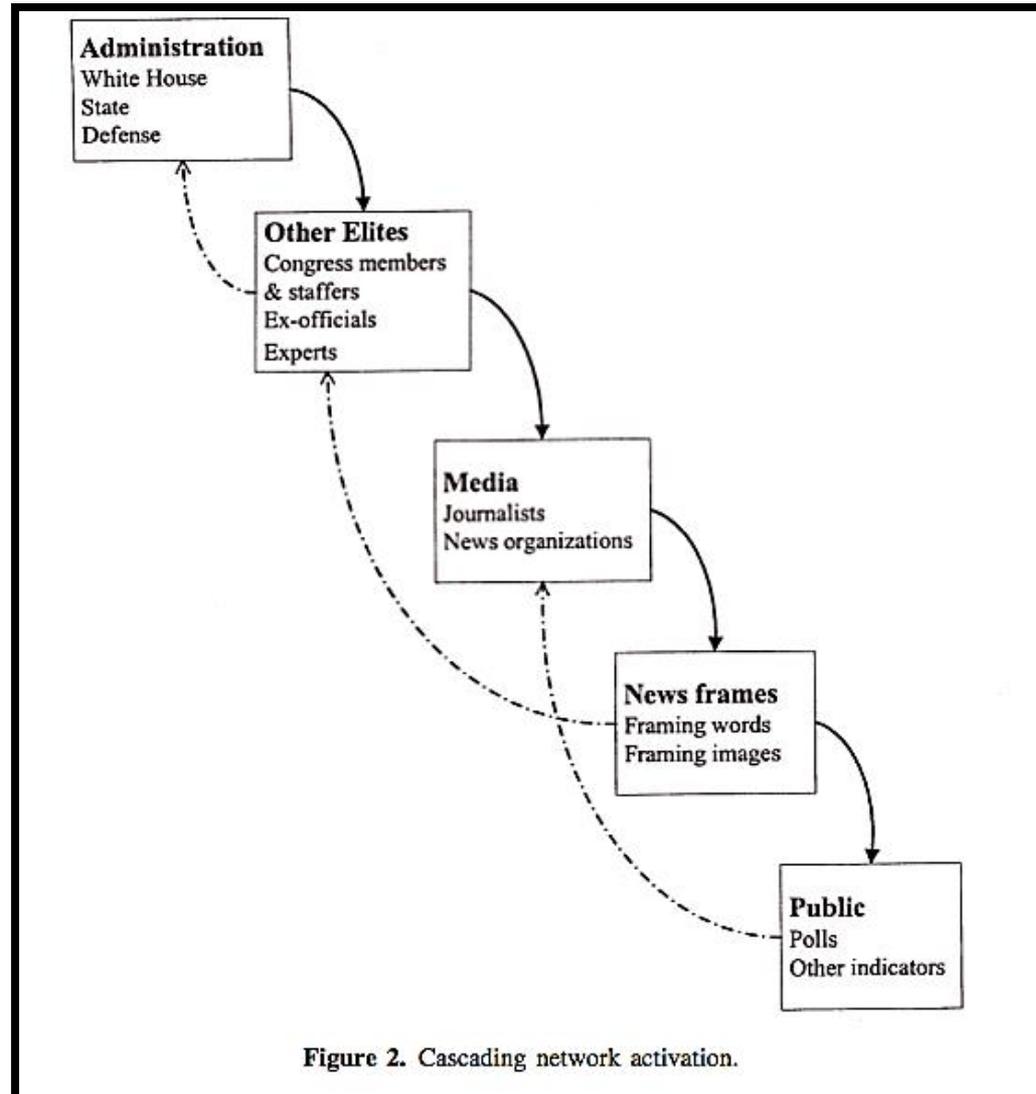
- Most hazardous assertions:
  - Part 4) “The West’ s universalist pretensions increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilizations, most seriously with Islam and China.”
  - Part 5) “The survival of the West depends on *Americans* reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners...uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies” (Huntington 20; italics mine).
- 3 issues within Islamic and Confucian societies the West must become more involved in:
  - 1) Maintain military superiority through policies of nonproliferation/counterproliferation
  - 2) Press other societies to respect human rights, and adopt democracy, as conceived in the West
  - 3) Restrict number of non-Western immigrants and refugees to protect cultural, social, and ethnic integrity of Western societies

# Media Framework



- In framing it used either a *geopolitical* or *micro-political framework*
  - *Geopolitical*: Juxtaposition between the West and Islam
  - *Micro-political*: Use of specific arguments from Huntington's book
- Robert Entman's *Cascading Activation Model* acts as a justification for the media's adoption of the Clash of Civilizations framework

# Cascading Activation Model



# Morrow's Priming



- Last article in Time magazine's special edition on Sept. 11
  - *A Case for Rage and Retribution*
- “Let America explore the rich reciprocal possibilities of the *fatwa*. A policy of focused brutality.”
  - *Fatwa*— “Formal legal opinion given by a mufti or canon lawyer...On the basis of such an opinion a judge may decide a case, or an individual may regulate his [or her] personal life”
- ‘Kicker’ of the ‘kicker’
  - “The worst times, as we see, separate the civilized world from the uncivilized...Let the civilized world toughen up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started.”

# The collective Muslim mind



- [Sept. 12] *NYT* ran *America the Vulnerable Meets a Ruthless Enemy*
  - “On the tape, Mr. bin Laden read a chilling poem with themes that have a powerful resonance among **Muslims with grievances against America.**”
- [Sept. 14] *WSJ* ran *Moving Target: Bin Laden’s network*
  - “Above all, the network’s [al Qaeda] great strength is his [bin Laden] ability to pick up people, especially **Muslims in Western countries at a loose end, looking for a cause.**”

# Good and bad Muslims



- *Moving Target* also exemplifies dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims created in the mainstream press
  - Muslims who are looking for a cause are potential terrorists
  - Muslims who have found a cause are not a threat
- *USA Today* article *Muslims Share USA ’s Sorrows in Attacks*
  - Apology by a Muslim man ‘on behalf of 7 million American Muslims’
- “All Muslims are now under the obligation to prove their credentials by joining the war on ‘bad’ Muslims.” –Mahmood Mamdani

# Pseudo-Feminism & Foreign Policy



- [Nov. 17] Laura Bush broadcast a message to the U.S.
  - “Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women’s fingernails for wearing nail polish.”
- [Dec. 3] *Time* magazine’s headline was *Lifting the Veil*
  - Focused on the plight of Afghan women
  - Depicted as marginalized, oppressed, weak
- [Nov. 19] *NYT* included *Behind the Burka*
  - “The freedom is still too new to completely trust...but for the first time in years, women here say they have hope—that they will be treated like human beings, not wayward cattle.”

# Implications



- Social
- Intellectual
- Political

# Social



- “By framing the crisis in the context of Islam it made all Muslims suspect—unless they could prove themselves innocent of being terrorists or sympathizing with terrorists.”
- *Time* magazine poll of Americans showed 67% of Americans supported an ongoing policy of interviews about 5000 people, ages 18-33 within the Arab-American and Islamic **community**
  - December 10, 2001
  - These two communities are polled together, as one

# Intellectual



- “Specialists who did not describe the conflict in the context of Islam and instead asked awkward questions were sidelined”
- Review of the book *Holy War, Inc.* in *NYT*
  - “Bergen takes issue with Samuel Huntington’s widely cited thesis that there is clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. He says bin Laden has a clear and specific political agenda—changing American policy in the Middle East.”
    - ✦ “But this seems a cramped, literal parsing of bin Laden’s few public statements and, in the end, simplistic and unsatisfying”

# Political



- Framing of Clash of Civilizations absolved U.S. government of all responsibility
  - ‘They’ hate our freedom
    - ✦ Rather than our policies
- The issue of Palestine was avoided as a consequence
- No talk of mujahedeen, sanctions on Iraq, or Al Shifa bombing
- Elusively, the concept of Islamic fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia was avoided as well
- “Paradigms do not need to be true to become conventional wisdom.”
  - It is up to the individual to prevent this from happening