

The Brightest House: Civilization and Asymmetry

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Imagine a village of glass houses at night. The houses are of various sizes and illuminations, but there is one prosperous house that is exceptionally well-lit and visible to all around. Each house has its own furniture and tastes, and the occupants are also curious about and influenced by what they can see their neighbors doing—and what they all can see happening in the brightest house. The activities observed in the brightest house are not necessarily attractive and they are, after all, the activities of other people; nevertheless they present at a distance an alternative mode of life and one that influences the whole village simultaneously. Their activities are the talk of the village and the temptation of youth in other houses looking for a life different from that of their parents. If the brightest house is as powerful as it is bright, the others will be either alarmed by its strength or reassured by its leadership.

The inhabitants of the brightest house are aware of their relative status in the village, and they are also curious about their neighbors. However, the other houses are less visible from inside the brightest house, and so particular neighbors and their activities attract attention only in times of crisis. If there is a fire, for instance, everyone in the brightest house will rush to the window to observe a neighbor that many of them had not noticed before. Many will look out the window in ordinary times, but they will see not only the dimmer light of the other houses, but also the reflected light of their own house. As a result, observing other houses will tend to confirm their sense of status rather than to present tempting alternatives.

This is a village in which all are equal in the eyes of God, but the villagers do not view one another from God's perspective. Bright lights and prosperity are not the same as virtue and quality; the light might be as harsh as the music is loud, and the tastes might be crude. However, the brightest lights, like the loudest music, will tend to prevail. This single reality induces a sense of civilizational validation and leadership among the inhabitants of the brightest house. Simultaneously it presents an external alternative and implicit challenge to the civilization of its neighbors.

Civilizational Clashes

The metaphor of the brightest house introduced above presents in an intuitive way a step beyond the controversy concerning the clash of civilizations initiated by Samuel Huntington in his famous *Foreign Affairs* article of 1993.¹ It shifts attention away from the abstract question of the mutual intelligibility of civilizations. Instead it asks how the unique position of the United States as world superpower might contribute to a rift of misunderstanding between itself and other countries. It is the asymmetry of the relationship between the United States and the rest of the global village rather than the distance between civilizations that is the crux of the problem. The asymmetry cannot be overcome; it is a situational fact rather than a pathology. But asymmetric relations can be acknowledged, studied, and managed more appropriately.

Although Huntington provided the starting gun for the current controversy over the clash of civilizations, he did so not by inventing the problem but by attacking its standard solution. It was commonly argued that cultures can and should learn from one another, that negative stereotypes and exaggerated fears result from ignorance and isolation, and thus that greater contact will reduce rough edges and make bridge building easier. Even Huntington contributed to this school of thought in earlier days:

The problem is one of ignorance—the product of a lack of communication—on the American side, and I can look at this only from the American side. [...] The problems of establishing trust between Americans and Arabs are little different from those of establishing trust between any other groups of individuals—between social classes or generations or, for that matter, between different people in different occupations. It is something which has to be done on an individual basis. (Stuart 2-3)²

Huntington's remarks make two points that are fundamental to the standard position: First, that cultures are not a special kind of unbridgeable

¹ "The Clash of Civilizations?" is included with the initial reactions and commentary in *The Clash of Civilizations?: The Debate*. Huntington expanded his original argument in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

² Edward Stuart, moderator, *Can Cultures Communicate?* An American Enterprise Institute Roundtable held on September 23. WA: The Institute, 1976. Other participants included Laura Nader, Mustafa Safwan and Edward Said.

social divide, and second, that the problem is ignorance, and therefore the solution is mutual contact and knowledge. Implicit is that cross-cultural misunderstanding is a serious obstacle and an irritant to more reasonable intercourse among nations, but that as the world shrinks these misunderstandings will diminish, though not without effort.

The Sam Huntington of 1993 takes the opposite position. He argues that civilizations are the ultimate common ground of understanding, and so there can be no significant cross-cultural understanding. Civilizations are an absolute social division, and without the distraction of overarching Cold War tensions, the chasms between civilizations will become the conflict zones of international friction and wars. So from his perspective, greater cross-cultural contact will no more breed smoother relations than greater contact between two geological plates at the San Andreas Fault in California will eventually soften both edges and eliminate earthquakes. As he puts it, "the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." He expects a world of increasing conflict based on civilizational differences. Although his article "The Clash of Civilizations?" has a question mark at the end of the title, he seems quite certain that major conflict is inevitable between America and Islamic civilization and between America and Confucian civilization. His *realpolitik* is one of circling the Western wagons, cooperating with Russia and Japan, and "exploiting the differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states."

There are a host of empirical and normative problems with Huntington's thesis (or antithesis). As an example, one might think that if civilizations were so clearly and basically self-differentiating it would be easy to count them. Yet Huntington refers rather casually to "seven or eight major civilizations," and these do not exactly match the civilizations mentioned by Arnold Toynbee, who is his authority in this matter (Toynbee 12-34). Moreover, Toynbee did not argue that civilizations were impermeable monads fated to constant clashes with one another, but rather that they had sufficient historical and cultural personality so that one could compare them. Toynbee's intellectual foes in the 1930s were those who maintained that universal (Western) modernity had relegated cultural differences to insignificant detail, and he trenchantly attacks Western egocentricism, the illusion of "the unchanging East," and the illusion of linear world progress. Toynbee must therefore be considered an honorable ancestor of the standard position, as the following passage would suggest:

When we Westerners call people 'natives' we implicitly take the cultural color out of our perception of them. We see them as wild animals infesting the country in which we happen to come across them, as part of the local flora and fauna and not as men of like passions with ourselves. So long as we think of them as 'natives' we may exterminate them, [...] but we do not begin to understand them. (36-37)

Toynbee's *Study of History* does not intend to present a taxonomy of "natives," but through comparison to situate the West, in historical costume, among its fellow humans.

Huntington's negation of the possibility of inter-cultural understanding can also be criticized from a normative point of view. Countless individuals and organizations do daily battle with intercultural ignorance, and there are many satisfactions as well as frustrations in their labors. No one thinks that civilizational conflict is insignificant, or that it can be definitively cured like smallpox, but the standard position blesses and encourages such efforts as the lubrication of a shrinking world, whereas Huntington's argument suggests that they are in vain.

Nevertheless, Huntington cannot simply be dismissed as wrong. He is one of the boldest, broadest and most systematically logical of American scholars of world politics. Moreover, the fact that he is a convert to his current position strengthens his credibility: the position he criticizes was at one time his own, so he must know it well. But the most powerful reason to take Huntington seriously is that he expresses a very American, perhaps all too American, attitude concerning the contemporary world. The attitude may be inaccurate, alienating, and ultimately self-destructive, but it is one that is widely shared, persistent, and not based simply on the absence of information. Huntington is an experienced and shrewd participant-observer in America's world political role, and he is expressing his sense of its momentum and outlook.

The question of whether Huntington is right in his speciation of cultures and in his prediction of inevitable clashes is distinct from the fact that to myself as an American the attitude he expresses is disturbingly familiar. Huntington may be wrong, but he is certainly real, and his civilizational friction and wars may yet occur even if in theory they are regrettable and avoidable. To disprove his thesis is one thing, to cope with

the reality of his illusion is another. The weakness of the standard position is that it assumes the existence of civilizational misunderstanding without analyzing it and then further assumes (and here is where Huntington attacks) that efforts to understand are treating the disease rather than the symptoms. In other words, the standard position can disprove Huntington, but it can't explain why he exists. The theory proposed here, which is more easily illustrated than articulated, attempts to explain Huntington as well as to criticize him.

One World, Two Perspectives

Certainly the current world situation is more complicated than Huntington's image of great cultures clashing in a common night. Each country has windows and is, willingly or unwillingly, influenced by others. But the theoretical equality of intercultural access does not produce a real equality of mutual influence and vulnerability. Inequalities in size, wealth, global power, and international trade resonate with inequalities in cultural production and relative influence. The argument here is that the disparity between America's leading world position and the situation of the rest of the world creates a unique perceptual environment for the United States, one that easily leads to misperception and misinterpretation of the actions of other cultures.

Of course, America is a diverse place, and Huntington's perspective is neither unanimous nor official. Indeed, one of the deepest parts of the American character is a moral consciousness that rejects smug superiority and insists on a self-critical and altruistic national mission. From the days of Tocqueville's visit to the current political incorrectness of political correctness, "what should be" trumps "what is" in American discourse. But Huntington is not simply a sinner against the American global conscience. Even at its most self-critically zealous, America remains located in an asymmetric world order, and if it is not self-conscious of its location, it can do more harm than good, whatever its intentions.

The special position of the United States is suggested by traditional notions of "the city on the hill" and other tropes of American exceptionalism. But the metaphor of the brightest house highlights not only the American advantage but also the resulting structural misperception caused by the asymmetric context. We will return to elaborating the metaphor because it has the advantage of presenting an intuitive picture of a

complex situation and because it offers the reader the opportunity to disengage from his or her actual position in and opinions about the US-world relationship and to view the analytical model as a whole, projected in a fictional form.

Because the brightest house occupies the center of village attention, it is the natural leader. Although each house is responsive to other houses as well as to the brightest house, no other house commands the attention of the rest to the same degree. The "natural" leadership of the center means that the rest will be responsive to its actions, but responsiveness does not necessarily mean loyalty or even compliance. Each house will determine whether its interests are best served by compliance, evasion, or opposition. This decision is affected but not determined by the rewards and punishments offered by the brightest house. Such incentives are important, but they rarely overwhelm local interests, and it is too expensive for the brightest house to buy or to force every act of compliance.³

Loyalty is not a natural prerogative of the brightest house. In order for the brightest house to induce a general willingness to comply with its leadership, others must be convinced that the order centered on the brightest house serves their interests better than the most likely alternatives. If the brightest house simply enjoys its positional advantage *vis-à-vis* the others and is not constrained by common interests or predictability, then to everyone else even chaos could appear preferable. In an alienated village the brightest house can preserve its leadership only through superior resources of coercion and skillful intimidation, neither of which are likely to last indefinitely. While the opportunity for leadership is created by a power advantage, in the long run leadership is maintained by the voluntary compliance. Sustainable leadership must induce loyalty by providing an order that is generally non-threatening, beneficial, and reliable.

Ironically, the asymmetry that makes the brightest house the natural leader also creates a perceptual chasm between it and the others. Since the brightest house has less to gain or lose in its bilateral relations with other houses, it is less attentive to them.⁴ Under-attentiveness can express itself in

³ Joseph Nye's argument for the importance of "soft power" was founded on similar considerations. See his *Bound to Lead*, in which he first introduced the concept, and his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* for an updated but simplified version.

⁴ The relationship between asymmetry and perception is pursued in greater detail in Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: The Cases of China, Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s."

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insensitivity, inconsistency, or bullying behavior. The opposite is true for the other houses in their dealings with the brightest house, because proportionally they have more at stake. They tend toward errors of over-attention. They are hyper-sensitive about perceived encroachments and paranoiac in perceiving threat. Unfortunately, the insensitivity of the brightest house and the hyper-sensitivity of the others can reinforce one another in a vicious circle of misperception. What is intended as a gentle push back into place is perceived as a mortal threat, and the consequent desperate action is taken as a general challenge to the authority of the brightest house. Even if an asymmetric relationship remains normal, the differences in perspective will be significant, and the brightest house has asymmetric relations with everyone else.

The pattern of activity in the brightest house will be observed and commented on by all the rest, and they might well be moved to copy what they saw, whether because of the intrinsic allure of various activities, the attraction of novelty, or the desire to share vicariously in the prestige of the brightest house. But long term exposure and even copying would not necessarily imply approval or empathetic understanding. It would, after all, remain another house, no matter how closely observed, and its interests and logic would be different. The observation of the inner workings of the brightest house would demonstrate to all on the outside that it was also only human. The failings of the brightest house would be painfully apparent to the others, creating frustration and resentment.

The external critique of the brightest house is likely to be more radical than the ongoing self-criticism within the brightest house, because those on the outside have the option of condemning the whole without questioning their own self-worth, whereas internal critics usually view their own problems as curable. Moreover, the other houses will be the victims of unintended acts of blindness and arrogance of the brightest house, acts of which even the most sensitive occupants of the brightest house are only dimly aware. And the greater the cultural distance between any one house and the brightest house, the greater the temptation to pull the shades on the windows in that direction. The greater the sense of threat to ones own culture, or pride in its autonomy, the more balefully its preservers will peer through the drawn blinds.

Meanwhile, those in the brightest house would have a very different view of the village. When they glance at their windows they see mostly a reflection of themselves, since they are the brightest, with dimmer shapes of

other houses beyond. They could easily assume that these others are simply smaller and dimmer versions of their own. Further, they could assume that what is different about the other houses is either an exotic peculiarity or a disappearing relic of the unenlightened past. When they travel outside they note that everyone is looking at their house, and that the light and patterns of their house have influenced the others. There would be a tendency to view and to judge the rest of the world by the light of the brightest house. Behavior in conformity would be considered reasonable and progressive, while differences would be considered exotic, abnormal, or unenlightened. Some in the brightest house might develop a sensitivity to the light of other cultures through travel and study. Others arrive as immigrants and bring with them their experience of part of the world outside. As individuals the voyagers and the immigrants would have some effect on the perceptions of their associates, but they might also isolate themselves by their blindness to what everyone else considers the normal and obvious way of viewing the world.

While a rather intimate and routine knowledge of the outside world (of which neighbors and the brightest house are major parts) is essential to smaller houses because the village is interactive, the brightest house is in a different situation. Although (or because) it considers the village "its" village, it tends to be episodic and focused in its attention to other houses. Its regular scanning of village affairs tends to be in terms of relations between itself and the house in question rather than in terms of internal developments in house x or the relations between house x and house y. The brightest house might also develop an interest in a particular issue and shine a spotlight around the village looking for information, but the salience of the issue and the interpretation of the information would be preset by the brightest house.

In times of crisis, even a tiny house can attract an enormous amount of attention from the brightest house, both because of the human interest generated by the crisis and because of the central responsibilities of village leadership felt by the brightest house. However, even though it might articulate its attention as altruistic generosity, the precondition of its interest is its own leadership role, and so the needs of the house in trouble will be interpreted accordingly. The brightest house will never allow itself to think that a crisis has been caused by too much of its own influence.

Because attention to crises is episodic and begins when the crisis breaks out, there is little attention to linkage between the crisis event and the long

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and gradual processes of decay that produced the crisis situation. The old philosophical conundrum of whether a tree falling alone in a forest makes a sound is turned on its head: only the falling trees attract attention, and they attract attention only when they are falling, and then they are compared with other falling trees rather than being understood in terms of their own life cycle. So one might ask if the standing trees exist for the person who only looks at the falling ones, or indeed whether individual trees exist, since only the act of falling is perceived.

To the brightest house, an attitude of rejection or even criticism of their culture by others is a radical and threatening phenomenon. It is not viewed as someone else's "in-house" preference or a defense of one's own house and one's own light, but as a radical rejection of light itself, and a direct threat to the world as understood by the brightest house. The only answer to resistance is to insist on more light, more transparency of the other culture, and the only explanation for resistance is a perverse love of darkness. A persistent opposition is likely to be seen as a struggle of darkness against light, and therefore one in which the line between us "good guys" and those "bad guys" must be drawn firmly and absolutely. The self-righteous assertion of our own goodness requires an uncompromising attitude. Moreover, there is little sense of what an appropriate compromise might be, since the circumstances that generated the initial problem are not understood. Unless the brightest house feels that its village is threatened from the outside and therefore it needs to compromise in order to maintain solidarity, there appears to be little need for compromise or even for continued contact with problematic houses.

Although the metaphor of the glass village has been formulated with the contemporary world in mind, it should be noted that the same pattern of asymmetric cultural relations can be observed between Europe and the rest of the world from 1500 to World War I (the United States was not so bright at that time), "the West (including but not highlighting America)" and the rest during the interwar period, and "the West (America)" and the non-communist world for the last fifty years. Moreover, the most elegant and long-lasting relationship of civilizational asymmetry was the hegemony of traditional China in East Asia from 200 BC to 1840. Indeed, the Chinese empire has much to teach latter-day leaders about the proper manners and morals of sustainable civilizational leadership.

On a smaller scale, and mitigated by countervailing patterns, analogous asymmetrical patterns can be seen in regional and national contexts.⁵ Russia will retain this relational pattern with much of the former Soviet Union, for instance, and the US presence in Mexico and Canada reflects both regional and global relationships. There is no doubt that Paris sees itself as the brightest house in France, Java the brightest house in Indonesia, or indeed that Harvard has played the stellar role in its galaxy of American academia.

Beyond Huntington

It does no good to view asymmetry as pathological and vow to equalize the world. The existence of big and small is not a fault of human interrelations, it is a character trait. China will never deal with Vietnam as an equal in mass, nor will the United States leap out of its skin of global leadership and go poking about the world incognito. The problem is not to overcome asymmetry, but to acknowledge the structural misperception that it induces.

From the vantage of the metaphor presented here, Huntington's clash of civilizations is both illusory and real. It is illusory insofar as it objectifies and universalizes a uniquely American perception of world culture and its conflicts. American culture is not as misunderstood in the Islamic world, for example, as the Islamic culture is in America. It is also illusory that cultures cannot influence one another; fundamentalist reactions are induced by what is perceived as too much influence, not too little. To a great extent, what appears to the US as the signs of intolerance and rejection in the rest of the world is rather an internal defensiveness against a globalizing mass culture originating in the West and identified with the US. So it is not rejection of an unknown and unknowable alien culture, but one that is too much present and too powerful. However, from the American perspective it is rejection of us by an unknown other, and it is easy to assume that they know as little of us as we do of them, and such perceptions can lead to a fear of shadows.

On the other hand, the perception of a clash of civilizations may be mistaken, but it is not simply a mistake. The metaphor of the brightest house gives a structural explanation for American cultural solipsism and the

⁵ The similar situations of the United States as a global power and China as an Asian regional power are explored in Brantly Womack, "How Size Matters: The United States, China and Asymmetry."

resulting American paranoia when confronted with rejection. Huntington's viewpoint is not the result of individual error or blindness, but rather of a situation in which the information projected by each side in an asymmetrical relationship is much different from the information received. The world and America look at one another through opposite ends of the telescope. The real asymmetry of world culture creates a tendency in the United States to perceive an illusory clash of civilizations.

Huntington's article reflects the typically American structural misperception of the world with particular strength and clarity, and this explains why so many American experts in world culture and politics have reacted vigorously to his article. Huntington's opponents are more than merely intellectual subscribers to the standard position. Most are scholars personally committed to explaining and interpreting the reality of an outside world, and thus they are in daily battle with the default tendency of their students, as well as of public opinion and politicians, to react to the world in terms of the American perspective rather than to go to the effort of understanding the world in its own context. The cosmopolitan experts are the constant voyagers in the gulf between the world in itself and the world for us. The presupposition of their task is that intercultural understanding is difficult but possible. Huntington is the intellectual archenemy, because in asserting that the gulf between cultures cannot be bridged, he is in fact assuming that his America-centered projections of the rest of the world are real, and thus that the gulf does not exist. Huntington's caricatures of Islamic and Confucian civilizations come perilously close to a dehumanization not unlike the discourse concerning "natives" in Toynbee's day.

If the metaphor of the brightest house is apt, then the problem of intercultural understanding is more urgent and more difficult than previously believed. The problem of misperception is not simply that of a residuum of ignorance, but of structurally different perspectives on the world. The task of understanding Iran, for instance, is not simply that of empathizing with its side of the relationship, but of realizing that it has been grievously wounded by the United States over the past fifty years, and that its actions are shaped by its knowledge of American power and hostility. For Americans to see ourselves from this perspective seems artificial, because we think we know ourselves better than that and we can easily dismiss Iran as paranoiac. America's problems with Iran are so different from Iran's problems with America that it is difficult—but not impossible—to sustain a consciousness of the other side's point of view.

Principles of Sustainable Global Leadership

While structural misperception can be overcome on an individual basis, it would require heroic assumptions of intercultural learning to argue that better international understanding will by itself dissolve the tectonic conflicts and avoid the civilizational clashes imagined by Huntington. Even if we imagine a crisis in which the wisest advisor explained the actual situation to the most statesmanlike American President, the President would face the choice between the high ground of globally appropriate action and the local ground of embodying and expressing the American end of the asymmetric relationship. If the President chose the globally appropriate action, the opposition would gleefully claim a policy space that would be more obvious, more convenient, more self-interested, and more self-righteous. If the President declined to take the high end of statesmanship, the opposition would be even less likely to seize that politically barren ground. Thus, to the extent that politics is local, even an informed actor will be drawn toward playing to the domestic mirror rather than playing to the very different consciousness of the counterpart. The more immediate the perceived crisis, and the more hostile the counterpart appears, the more likely it is that location will override a larger strategic rationality. Leadership will tend to be operationalized as quarterbacking the American team, not as surveying the whole game.

Is Huntington's pessimism then correct, even if his arguments are not? Are we doomed to civilizational clashes not because cultures are inherently unintelligible, but because of the overriding vividness of our own side will lead to conflict? Does democracy doom us to culture wars that more autonomous foreign policy leadership could have avoided? These questions are serious enough in themselves, and they imply an inevitable situation of global divisiveness and conflict.

If we return to the basic picture of asymmetric relations then some general principles for their management will emerge. Although asymmetric perceptions cannot be equalized, it is possible to moderate the effect of misperceptions by creating a relational sleeve that minimizes the temptation toward erratic actions by either side that in turn might be misperceived by the other side. Working within the relational sleeve, the brightest house will be less likely to ignore the interests of others, less likely to engage in frightening behavior, and more likely to reinforce common interests and common understandings about the relationship. Meanwhile the others would discount the possibility that the brightest house might act erratically

or malevolently and therefore would themselves be less likely to act fearfully. The more well-traveled the anticipated track of mutually beneficial relations, the less likely that occasional detours or even long-standing disagreements will unseat the relationship. All have a strong common interest in maintaining the relational sleeve because otherwise a vicious circle of misunderstandings is possible. Both need to know what to expect in the relationship, and to count on it.

Therefore the cardinal priority in asymmetric relations is the formulation and maintenance of the general, mutually beneficial pattern of the relationship. This is the special responsibility of the more powerful side, because it has more discretion and the more vulnerable side will be attentive to its actions. It is also to the long-term interest of the more powerful, because relational stability enables it to maintain its leadership without the exercise of domination, which is usually an expensive, destructive and risky business. Domination burns the candle of superiority. Sustainable leadership is relational leadership.

What is true for a single asymmetric relationship is also true for the general relationship of disparity between the United States and the rest of the world. If the United States fails to develop a posture of global leadership that is inclusive of other countries and interests, it leaves each potential counterpart to imagine itself against the full might of a malevolent America, and to plan accordingly. If the United States treats each international transaction and crisis as if it is unencumbered by a relational context it will of course play a better hand, but at the same time it will remind all onlookers of their own vulnerability. When the United States invades Granada, bullies Cuba, or attempts to force automobile quotas on Japan, it uses its superior power to maximize its own position and contributes to the gulf between itself and the less powerful. Generally speaking, the United States has created a relational sleeve that is light and billowy. It does not constrain our impulses, and it does not reassure our global neighbors.

A more structurally sensitive leadership posture requires the acknowledgment of common interests and the neutralization of potential problems. By definition, common interests are not in contradiction to ones own interest, though they do constrain the single-minded pursuit of ones own advantage. The general implications of relational leadership for the United States might be formulated as the "Four Rs": Rhetoric, Ritual, Routine and Responsiveness.

The rhetoric of sustainable leadership is not the boasting of the strong. It is the articulation of principles that assure the others that the leader is aware of and acts according to overarching common interests. At the most general level, a situation of asymmetric relationships must be justified in terms of the utility of peace and the inclusiveness, deliberateness and equity of the leader's behavior. In specific crises, the leader's public posture must be designed with more than the domestic rear view mirror in mind. On the front view, consideration must be given to mitigating unnecessary fears of vulnerability and exclusion of the counterpart, and on the side view, to explaining how the action fits general principles of leadership and does not weaken the fabric of other relationships. There is no necessary conflict between domestic and external rhetoric because the underlying principles of both should be the common good and the differences of formulation are directed at different audiences.

Diplomats are a notoriously cynical circle, and even the best-formulated and most seriously intentioned rhetoric is not likely to be accepted at face value. However, the absence of articulation of common values and interests implies that the leader is not even aware of the need to provide grounds for legitimating the compliance of others. The leader is simply acting as the strongest rather than as the top of a mutually beneficial and constraining structure, and both opponents and followers are left to act out of weakness.

Ritual may appear to be too hollow a reed to support global leadership—the phrase "empty ritual" appears redundant. However, it is precisely the hollowness of ritual—its lack of a transactional pith—that makes it peculiarly important to asymmetric relations. Ritual reinforces and sanctifies the sleeve of the relationship, and it acknowledges the existence and importance of the relationship abstracted from current business. Its neglect implies that the relationship is rated at no more than the net value of current transactions, or that the partner is unworthy of the official attention of the leader. Regular official visits and their accompanying pomp and photo-ops are the most visible form of ritual, but it also includes attention to consultation, contact, and protocol.

A quick illustration of progress and limits in relational diplomacy is President Clinton's China policy. For a number of reasons, including symptoms of a "brightest house" mentality, initial policy was contradictory. On the one hand, Clinton remained committed to continuing normal relations with China and to expanding trade. On the other, he maintained

the posture established during his 1992 election campaign of emphasizing human rights. By the spring of 1994, the Clinton administration faced a crisis largely of its own creation due to the failure of its human rights ultimatums. After biting the bullet of unlinking human rights and Most Favored Nation (MFN) renewal, the administration's subsequent policy placed priority on maintaining a normal relationship. But having foregone any ritualization of the relationship, the United States hit a myriad of small crises in a context of mutual suspicion and therefore paid a frequent, large, and public price for the relationship. Relations reached their nadir with the 1995 visit of Taiwan's Lee Teng-hui to Cornell and the subsequent saber-rattling in the Taiwan Straits. Finally, an exchange of state visits was arranged between President Clinton and President Jiang Zemin in 1997-98. Although few specific achievements resulted from the visits, a general calm was restored to the relationship. No amount of official visits, non-crisis reiterations of mutually acceptable principles, and so forth will ever make American and Chinese interests coincide, but it is beyond question that relational uncertainty exacerbates conflict, and that relational uncertainty can be reduced without surrendering national interests. Ritual mends the sleeve of the relationship.

Routinization neutralizes potential areas of conflict by assigning them to specialized bilateral or multilateral bodies. To the extent that the management of a problem can be turned over to specialists of both countries the potential for public confrontation is reduced. Border and fisheries commissions are the most obvious examples, but more ad hoc neutralizations are also possible. Of course, no issue is ever immune to re-politicization, but even so, the existence of a mechanism will likely focus the conflict on the rules and procedures of management rather than on broader and more dangerous issues. If a multilateral organization becomes involved in an issue area, then bilateral conflicts can be deflected from head-to-head confrontations into more neutral venues. Civilized international life would be difficult to imagine without the various commissions and activities of the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.

The last of the "R's," responsiveness, is a concept that, in contrast to rhetoric and ritual, does receive much attention in American diplomacy. The American president is expected to provide official commentary on world events while they are unfolding on CNN, and the technical capacity of American responsiveness, both diplomatic and military, is impressive

indeed. Meanwhile Congress constrains the President to provide regular reports on an increasing variety of diplomatic topics, and non-governmental organizations have their manifold antennae out for the faintest signs of disturbing developments. It appears that every leaf that falls in the world is heard somewhere in Washington, and the reverberation is sometimes louder than the original event.

But responsiveness as a value in sustainable leadership lays emphasis elsewhere. Responsiveness cannot require the constant attentiveness of top leadership, but it should expect that the leader's foreign affairs institutions are elaborate and expert enough to register and appreciate all positions in a dispute, and that the stronger power respects its own diplomatic institutions enough to allow them to be its default official voice in subliminal matters. In crisis situations, the stronger power needs to remind itself that the politics of the adversary is local even if the interest of the United States in the conflict is global, and therefore to be especially alert to signals and opportunities to disengage the adversary from the context of confrontation. All condemnations and sanctions should be contingent, because anything else implies unconditional malevolence on our part, which in turn justifies any behavior on the part of the adversary except submission. It should be recalled that the natural inclination of the stronger is to assume that an irrational, recalcitrant leadership is the root cause of any problem, and to expend its vast resources of responsiveness on removing the leadership by hook or by crook. Saddam Hussein in Iraq is the most obvious example, but by no means the only one. Responsiveness that does not appreciate relationships is responsiveness that remains unaware of the dignity and organized self-interests of the rest of the world. One should not treat the rest of the world as "Indian territory"; indeed, one should not have treated Indian territory that way.

After the Cold War, the United States stands alone and victorious in the ring of superpowers. The greatest threat to the American global position is not the rise of China or Islam to equal status, but the self-isolation of the United States through positional rather than relational leadership. For example, if Japan in the future were forced by China to choose between China and the US, the decision would be painful but obvious. If however Japan were forced by the United States to choose between America and Asia, the choice would be even more painful and even more obvious. If America behaves like the world's only superpower rather than as a responsible global leader, we may alienate the rest of the world to the point that there are few

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"Western" wagons for us to circle. The situation would be reminiscent of the old Lone Ranger joke in which the Lone Ranger and Tonto are surrounded by hordes of hostile Indians. "Well Tonto, old friend," says the Lone Ranger, "It looks like we are done for." "What do you mean 'we,' Kimosabe?" says Tonto.

Relational leadership is role-constrained leadership. It lacks the tingle of impulsiveness, and it reduces the satisfying crunch of domination. For an Alexander, or a Genghis Khan, or a Cortez, or a Custer, it might have only humanity and morality to recommend it. But the only way to eternal youth is to die young. For a post-Cold War America, the task is a middle-aged one of extending indefinitely a global order in which it plays the key role, and this can best be done if everyone has reason to consider American leadership to be in their interest.

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