Name two conservative world leaders who champion family values and hate liberal relativism. One is U.S. President George W. Bush, according to Judith Yaphe, distinguished research professor at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, in Washington D.C. But the other might surprise you: Mahmood Ahmadinejad of Iran.

Yaphe, who specializes in the Middle East, discussed the differences and surprising similarities between the outlooks of Bush and Ahmadinejad during her talk "Iranian Aspirations and American Options: A Tale of Two Cities," held May 10 at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies. She described Iran’s plans to acquire nuclear weapons capability and discussed the United States’ role in the region from the perspectives of both men.

Samuel Huntington has called the relationship between the West and the Middle East a “clash of civilizations.” While Bush and Ahmadinejad are indeed miscommunicating, Yaphe said, they have more in common than is generally appreciated. Both leaders would proclaim, “I am right. I am conservative.” But they have two different notions of conservatism in mind. The American president would emphasize individuals over the community, while the opposite would be the case in Iran. And while Ahmadinejad frames his goals and values in terms of justice (Shia justice), Bush talks about freedom.

Yaphe described how Iranian perceptions of the Middle East differ from American perceptions. For example, Ahmadinejad sees the United States as surrounded by Muslims, meaning that America needs Iran’s support and friendship. By contrast, Bush sees Iran as encircled by U.S. allies, meaning that he does not take Ahmadinejad’s offer of support and friendship seriously.

To help put Ahmadinejad’s attitudes toward domestic Iranian issues and the United States in context, Yaphe gave a biographical sketch of the Iranian president. Ahmadinejad was educated as a civil engineer (a straight-A student) and was once an excellent soccer player. A devoted Muslim, he was a radical participant in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and now represents the second generation of leaders of the Islamic Republic.

Ahmadinejad’s views were strongly shaped by the revolution. Yaphe noted that he probably believes that Iran was “sold out” to foreigners by recent leaders who were neither devout nor serious enough. He would probably accuse Iran’s previous president, Akbar Haschemi Rafsanjani, of being unscrupulous and standing for the rich. By contrast, Ahmadinejad lives in a small house, and does not buy expensive, trendy clothes.

Ahmadinejad would probably describe himself as a patriot, dedicated to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country’s most powerful religious and political figure. Ahmadinejad espouses a return to the purity of the revolution in its earlier days. He feels that Iranians have not been close enough to their faith, making restrictive laws necessary.

Yaphe summarized Ahmadinejad’s goals: “I’m a good Islamist. I want a good government, and I strive for the elimination of foreign influence because I hate what I see as neo-imperialism and colonialism. Do not tell us what to do with our nuclear capacity.”

Ahmadinejad wants the American presence out of the Middle East, Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, and he wants the United States to recognize the Iranian government as legitimate. Yaphe characterized Ahmadinejad’s interests in democracy in the Middle East as strong – he does want a stable, democratic Iraq, but one with a Shia government that supports Iran.

Yaphe concluded by noting that there are two general opinions regarding Ahmadinejad’s influence among the Iranian leadership. First, some people believe that the Supreme Leader Khamenei feels Ahmadinejad has overstepped his bounds as president in making bold overtures
to the United States, in which case Ahmadinejad may shortly be removed. Others believe that Khamenei does effectively keep all leaders and spokesmen on a short leash. If so, Ahmadinejad really is speaking for all Iranian leaders.

Ultimately, Yaphe said that no one outside of the inner circle of Iranian politics can know just how influential Ahmadinejad is. This makes it difficult to gauge how much of a challenge he poses to American foreign policy and interests in the Middle East. While Ahmadinejad frames his goals and values in nationalist terms, proclaiming what is best for Iranians and Muslims, it is not clear how much of Iran he actually represents.