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The Case for Optimism

The West Should Believe in Itself

Robert L. Bartley

On November 9, 1989, our era ended. The breaching of the Berlin Wall sounded the end of not merely the Cold War, but an epoch of global conflict that started with the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914. Now, with the twentieth century truncated, we are straining to discern the shape of the 21st.

We should remember that while there is of course always conflict and strife, not all centuries are as bloody as ours has been. The assassination in Sarajevo shattered an extraordinary period of economic, artistic and moral advance. It was a period when serious thinkers could imagine world economic unity bringing an end to wars. The conventional wisdom, as Keynes would later write, considered peace and prosperity "as normal, certain, and permanent, except in the direction of further improvement, and any deviation from [this course] as aberrant, scandalous, and avoidable."

If with benefit of hindsight this optimism seems wildly naïve, what will future generations make of the crabbed pessimism of today's conventional wis-

dom? Exhausted and jaded by our labors and trials, we now probe the dawning era for evidence not of relief but of new and even more ghastly horrors ahead. In particular, we have lost confidence in our own ability to shape the new era, and instead keep conjuring up inexorable historical and moral forces. Our public discourse is filled with guilt-ridden talk of global warming, the extinction of various species and Western decline.

Even so hardheaded a thinker as Samuel P. Huntington has concluded, "A West at the peak of its power confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways." The conflicts of the future will be between "the West and the rest," the West and the Muslims, the West and an Islamic-Confucian alliance, or the West and a collection of other civilizations, including Hindu, Japanese, Latin American and Slavic-Orthodox.

This "clash of civilizations" does not sound like a pleasant 21st century. The conflicts will not be over resources, where

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it is always possible to split the difference, but over fundamental and often irreconcilable values. And in this competition the United States and the West will inevitably be on the defensive, since "the values that are most important in the West are the least important worldwide."

Well, perhaps. But is it really clear that the greatest potential for conflict lies between civilizations instead of within them? Despite the economic miracle of China's Guangdong province, are we really confident that the Confucians have mastered the trick of governing a billion people in one political entity? Do the women of Iran really long for the chador, or is it just possible the people of "the rest" will ultimately be attracted to the values of the West?

Undeniably there is an upsurge of interest in cultural, ethnic and religious values, notably but not solely in Islamic fundamentalism. But at the same time there are powerful forces toward world integration. Instant communications now span the globe. We watch in real time the drama of Tiananmen Square and Sarajevo (if not yet Lhasa or Dushanbe). Financial markets on a 24-hour schedule link the world's economies.

Western, which is to say American, popular culture for better or worse spans the globe as well. The new Japanese crown princess was educated at Harvard, and the latest sumo sensation is known as Akebone, but played basketball as Chad Rowen. The world's language is English. Even the standard-bearers of "the rest" were largely educated in the West. Boatloads of immigrants, perhaps the true hallmark of the 21st century, land on the beaches of New York's Long Island.

This environment is not a happy one for governments of traditional nation states. In 1982 François Mitterrand found how markets limit national economic policy. A national currency—which is to say an independent monetary policy—is possible at sustainable cost only for the United States, and even then within limits, as the Carter administration found in 1979. In Western Europe and the Western hemisphere, the demands of national security have ebbed with the Cold War. Transnational companies and regional development leave the nation-state searching for a mission, as Kenichi Ohmae has detailed. Robert Reich asks what makes an "American" corporation. Walter Wriston writes of "The Twilight of Sovereignty."

These difficulties confront all governments, but they are doubly acute for authoritarians, who depend on isolation to dominate their people. Democracy, the quintessentially Western form of government, spread with amazing speed throughout Latin America and the former communist bloc and into Africa and Asia. In 1993 Freedom House reports 75 free nations, up from 55 a decade earlier, with only 31 percent of the world's population, and most of that in China, living under repressive regimes, down from 44 percent ten years ago. The combination of instant information, economic interdependence and the appeal of individual freedom is not a force to be taken lightly. After all, it has just toppled the most powerful totalitarian empire history has known.

It is precisely the onslaught of this world civilization, of course, that provokes such reactions as Islamic fundamentalism.

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The mullahs profess to reject the decadent West, but their underlying quarrel is with modernity. Perhaps they have the "will and resources" to construct an alternative, and perhaps so does the geriatric regime in Beijing. But they face a deep dilemma indeed, for Western civilization and its political appendages of democracy and personal freedom are profoundly linked with the capitalist formula that is *the* formula for economic development.

THE POWER OF PROSPERITY

If you list the Freedom House rankings by per-capita annual income, you find that above figures equivalent to about \$5,500, nearly all nations are democratic. The exceptions are the medieval oil sheikhdoms and a few Asian tigers such as Singapore. Even among the latter, development is leading to pressures for more freedom. Under Roh Tae Woo South Korea has deserted to full democracy. Nor should the implosion of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan be comforting to advocates of some "consensual" model of democracy. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew may be right to consider himself a philosopher king, but since Plato the species has been endangered and unreliable.

Perhaps Western values are an artifact of an exogenous civilization, but there is a powerful argument that they are an artifact of economic development itself. Development creates a middle class that wants a say in its own future, that cares about the progress and freedom of its sons and daughters. Since economic progress depends principally on this same group, with its drive for education and creative abilities, this desire can be suppressed

only at the expense of development.

In the early stages of development, as for example in Guangdong, the ruling elites may be able to forge an accommodation with the middle class, particularly if local military authorities are dealt into the action. But if the Chinese accommodation survives, it will be the first one. The attempt to incorporate the six million Hong Kong Chinese, with their increasingly evident expectation of self-rule, will be particularly disruptive. The lesson of other successfully developing nations is that continued progress depends on a gradual accommodation with democracy. And history teaches another profoundly optimistic lesson: as Huntington himself has been known to observe, democracies almost never go to war with each other.

The dominant flow of historical forces in the 21st century could well be this: economic development leads to demands for democracy and individual (or familial) autonomy; instant worldwide communications reduces the power of oppressive governments; the spread of democratic states diminishes the potential for conflict. The optimists of 1910, in other words, may turn out to have been merely premature.

STAYING THE COURSE

This future is of course no sure thing. Perhaps Huntington's forces of disintegration will in the end prevail, but that is no sure thing either. The West, above all the United States, and above even that the elites who read this journal, have the capacity to influence which of these futures is more likely. If the fears prevail, it will be in no small part because they

lacked the will and wit to bring the hopes to reality.

The American foreign policy elite is in a sense the victim of its own success. Much to its own surprise, it won the Cold War. The classic containment policy outlined in George Kennan's "X" article and Paul Nitze's NSC-68 worked precisely as advertised, albeit after 40 years rather than the 10 to 15 Kennan predicted. But after its success, this compass is no longer relevant; as we enter the 21st century, our policy debate is adrift without a vision.

Some observations above hint at one such vision: if democracies do not fight each other, their spread not only fulfills our ideals but also promotes our security interests. The era of peace before 1914 was forged by the Royal Navy, the pound sterling and free trade. The essence of the task for the new era is to strike a balance between realpolitik and moralism.

Traditional diplomacy centers on relations among sovereign nation states, the internal character of which is irrelevant. In an information age, dominated by people-to-people contacts, policy should and will edge cautiously toward the moralistic, Wilsonian pole. Cautiously because as always this carries a risk of mindlessness. We cannot ignore military power; nothing could do more to give us freedom of action in the 21st century than a ballistic missile defense, whether or not you call it Star Wars. And while we need a human rights policy, applying it merely because we have access and leverage risks undermining, say, Egypt and Turkey, the bulwarks against an Islamic fundamentalism more detrimental to freedom and less susceptible to Western influence.

It will be a difficult balance to strike. The case for optimism is admittedly not easy to sustain. Plumbing the temper of our elites and the state of debate, it is easier to give credence to Huntington's fears. But then, during the Hungarian revolution or Vietnam or the Pershing missile crisis, who would have thought that the West would stay the course it set out in NSC-68? It did, and to do so again it needs only to believe in itself. ㊟