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The Catastrophe Quota:

TROUBLE AFTER THE COLD WAR

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As the major problems that have bedeviled the world over the last half century have been resolved, the quest for things to worry about has continued unabated. The notion has taken hold that international affairs have somehow now become especially tumultuous, unstable, and complex. To arrive at such a conclusion, five techniques have been applied: the past has been simplified, a Eurocentric bias has been introduced, definitions have been changed, standards have been raised, and problems previously considered to be comparatively minor have been elevated in perceived importance.

In his farewell address upon leaving the presidency in January 1953, Harry Truman looked to the future with confidence. He had no doubt that the “menace of Communism,” which he considered the “overriding issue of our time,” would eventually be overcome. And he allowed himself to look forward to the “world we hope to have” when that desirable event came about. It would be a “new era,” he anticipated, “a wonderful golden age”—an age when “our capital, our skills, our science” can be “released from the tasks of defense and turned wholly to peaceful purposes all around the world . . . [to] do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on the earth. . . . There is no end to what can be done” (Truman 1966, 378).

We have, it appears, now entered Truman’s new era. The Cold War often seemed intractable: coping with Soviet strength, observed Henry Kissinger in 1976, is a condition that “will not go away. And it will perhaps never be conclusively ‘solved’” (Kissinger 1977, 304). Zbigniew Brzezinski declared in 1986 that “the American-Soviet conflict is not some temporary aberration

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but a historical rivalry that will long endure” (Brzezinski 1986, xiii).¹ But the international communist threat has now not merely been “overcome,” as Truman put it, but essentially extinguished. In the process, in a remarkably short time virtually all the major problems that tormented big country (sometimes known as Great Power) international relations for nearly half a century were resolved: the unpopular and often brutal Soviet occupation of East Europe; the artificial and deeply troubling division of Germany; the expensive, virulent, crisis-prone, and apparently dangerous military contest between East and West; and the ideological struggle between authoritarian, expansionist, violence-encouraging communism and reactive, sometimes panicky capitalist democracy.

However, although we are now free as never before to use capital, skill, and science to do away with poverty and human misery, it somehow does not really feel too much like “a wonderful golden age.” Truman’s phrase is extreme, of course—it even borders dangerously on the poetic. And if it is taken to suggest a trouble-free utopia, it could casually be dismissed as an unattainable dream. But, although Truman may sometimes have been a bit of a dreamer, he was too realistic to expect utter perfection. Some of our difficulty in surrendering to such a characterization may be that, because of the way we tend to look at the world, we would not know we were in a wonderful golden age if it came up and kissed us on the left earlobe. Thus it appears that the character in George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* was onto something when he observed, “There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it.”

As many of the major problems that have bedeviled the world over the last half century—*overriding issues*, in Truman’s terms—have been resolved, the quest for things to worry about has continued unabated. The notion has taken hold that international affairs have somehow now become especially tumultuous, unstable, and complex.

This idea has been repeated so often it sounds like a mantra. Thus Bill Clinton proclaimed in his 1993 presidential inaugural address that “the new world is more free but less stable.” And CIA Director James Woolsey (1993), not perhaps without a degree of institutional self-interest, professes to believe darkly that “we have slain a large dragon, but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.” His predecessor at the CIA,

1. As Paul Kennedy observed in 1987, “there is nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully” (p. 514). Fukuyama (1987) interprets the Gorbachev era as one of a series of rightward swings in Soviet foreign policy, and he concludes that “of one thing we can be relatively sure: the Soviet Union is likely to remain an expansionist power with far-flung military and political interests all over the Third World” (p. 13). For a different view, see Mueller (1986).

Robert Gates (1993), fully agrees: “The events of the last two years have led to a far more unstable, turbulent, unpredictable and violent world.” This theme has also been echoed by many international relations scholars as they try to come to grips with a field undergoing tremendous change where old categories no longer work very well, and perhaps as they confront apparently decreased interest in the academy. Thus, as Stanley Hoffmann (1992) puts it, “the problem of order has become even more complex than before” (p. 37).

To arrive at such a view, five techniques have been applied: the past has been simplified, a Eurocentric bias has been introduced, definitions have been changed, standards have been raised, and problems previously considered to be comparatively minor have been elevated in perceived importance.

SIMPLIFYING THE PAST: RECOLLECTIONS OF THE COLD WAR

Conclusions about the comparative complexity of the world in the wake of the Cold War stem in part from a remarkably simplified recollection of what went on during the Cold War. This phenomenon is related to the tendency to look backward with misty eyes, to see the past as much more benign, simple, and innocent than it really was (by contrast, see Bettmann 1974). That is, no matter how much better the present gets, the past gets better faster in reflection, and we are, accordingly, always notably worse off than we used to be. Golden ages, thus, do happen, but we are never actually *in* them: they are always back there somewhere in the past (or sometimes in the ungraspable future).

For example, those reminiscing about the “happy days” of the 1950s casually forget McCarthyism, a terribly destructive war in Korea, and an intense unease brought about by the apparently credible communist threat to “bury” the West in a decade or two, something that was bolstered by CIA predictions that the Soviet Union’s gross national product might be triple that of the United States by the year 2000 (Reeves 1993, 54).

Or there is Woolsey’s (1993) recollection that the Cold War threat could be characterized “precisely and succinctly” because our adversary was “a single power whose interests fundamentally threatened ours.” Or the belief of the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman (1992a) that “all the policy-makers had to do was take out their compasses, point them at any regional conflict in the world, see which side Moscow was on and immediately deduce which side America should take.” Or the confident assertion of *Newsweek*’s Meg Greenfield (1993) that “conducting the nation’s business overseas has be-

come more difficult with the disappearance of a unifying, clearly defined and universally understood threat.”

But the communist threat was shifting, multifaceted, and extremely complicated. And most of the time there were two central sources of threat, China and the USSR, not one. Indeed, the challenge the Vietnam War was principally designed to counter came from China, not from the Soviet Union (see Mueller 1989, 168-73). Moreover, the Chinese and the Soviet Union, although jointly threatening the West, were often intensely at odds with each other—nearly at war a few times—over both strategy and tactics, complicating things further.² And it was often extremely difficult to deduce which side to take: the United States supported the Chinese group against the Soviet one in Angola, puzzled for years over whose side Cuba’s Fidel Castro was on, joined with the Soviet Union to support the formation of Israel as well as the leftist regime in Tanzania, found that virtually all communist rebellions were confusingly associated with indigenous ones, and never really did determine whether some countries, like Mozambique, should be considered to be communist or not.

Friedman and others may think that the policy of containment—with its overarching theory about confronting communist expansionism—gave a clear and easily followed guideline and allowed for a great deal of consistency in U.S. foreign policy, but the actual experience of the Cold War surely suggests that there was a great deal of bobbing and weaving in the application of the policy. Even as the containment policy was being formulated, the Truman administration was allowing China to fall into the communist camp. Eisenhower was unwilling to use military measures to prevent a communist victory in Indochina, but he held fast on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu off the China coast. Kennedy sought to shore up the anticommunist position in South Vietnam even as he was acquiescing in an agreement that gave the communists effective control of large portions of neighboring Laos. Containment policy may have been a useful general guide, but it clearly did not make policy easy to formulate. And the United States and its allies were frequently in desperate dispute over how to deal with Greenfield’s unifying, clearly defined, and universally understood threat.

Indeed, if the post-Cold War world resembles a jungle filled with poisonous snakes, the Cold War was a jungle filled with at least two dragons *and* poisonous snakes, some of whom were variously, changeably, and often quite

2. Samuel Huntington (1993c) argues that the Cold War paradigm “blinded scholars and statesmen to major developments, such as the Sino-Soviet split” (p. 187)—a popular conclusion about the era that, as John Gaddis (1987, chap. 6) has demonstrated, is substantially exaggerated. But then Huntington (1993c) goes on to declare that “global politics are now too complex to be stuffed into two pigeon-holes” (p. 187).

ambiguously in devious complicity with one or the other of the dragons. It seems obvious which jungle is preferable—and less complicated.

In the process, the Cold War added a special layer of complexity to U.S. relations with a whole host of countries. At one time the United States had to treat Mobutu of Zaire as a dictator who had brought his country to ruin but who was on the right side in the Cold War. Today it can treat him merely as a dictator who has brought his country to ruin. In that very important respect, international policy has become far *less* complex than it was during the Cold War.

Greenfield (1993) bemoans “the disintegration of order, authority and institutions all over the world,” implying that we have just emerged from a world where everything was nice and orderly and where authority was unchallenged—a bizarre suggestion. Relatedly, Hoffmann (1992) argues that “during the Cold War, the superpowers, driven by the fear of nuclear war, devised by trial and error, a network of rules and restraints aimed at avoiding direct military collision” (p. 37). This is true, although it is certainly worth noting that those countries still managed to get into quite a few *indirect* military collisions, some of them extremely bloody. And in our new world, however disorderly and complex it may be, the dangers of a military collision, direct or indirect, between East and West have become so attenuated that it becomes almost absurd to suggest that a network of rules and restraints is necessary to avoid it—any more than one would maintain that such a network is necessary to prevent military conflict between the United States and Canada.

NATIONALISM, EUROCENTRISM, AND LOCAL WAR

Warfare arising from ethnic and national hatreds is certainly not new. As Barry Posen (1993) has pointed out, “Nationalism was hardly quiescent in the last forty-five years: it played a key role in the decolonization process, fueling both revolutionary and inter-state warfare” (p. 80). But there are new concerns about this in Europe, and those who find the world more complicated and tumultuous than during the Cold War tend to focus on conflict on that continent. For a long period after the end of the Greek Civil War in 1949, there were no civil wars in Europe. That remarkable record has now been shattered with the civil wars that have erupted in the former Yugoslavia. In addition, political and economic chaos—some of it violent—has accompanied the disintegration of the Soviet and then the Russian empires in eastern Europe and particularly in Asia.

These problems are, of course, very real. But it is surely worth pointing out again that they have followed a remarkable—and remarkably peaceful—

resolution of a host of key international problems centered in Europe. Moreover, it is not really clear that the Cold War was so instrumental in arresting civil conflict. "Ethnic cleansing" is hardly new. For years Bulgarian communists had a persecution policy focused on domestic Turks, for example. And fighting between Armenians and Azeris began before the Cold War ended, whereas Yugoslavia's derived from an ill-managed effort to confederate the country, something that could have happened almost as well during the Cold War as after it.³

In addition, if post-Cold War Europe now has more armed conflict than it experienced during the Cold War, much of the rest of the world is suffering *less* warfare than earlier. Specifically, during the Cold War, Latin America underwent a long and bloody series of civil wars, most of which were inspired or exacerbated by the Cold War contest. After the Cold War, this area has become far freer of civil war. Even more notable is the experience of East and Southeast Asia. The Cold War led to, or notably exacerbated, lengthy and costly wars in Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Vietnam, and elsewhere, and in Cambodia it led not only to civil war, but a postwar peace that was even worse. Problems remain in East Asia, but surely it has become far more stable, peaceful, and economically productive after the Cold War than it had been during the Cold War.

Thus, unless one adopts a thoroughly Eurocentric perspective, it is simply not true that "conflicts among nations and ethnic groups are escalating," as Samuel Huntington (1993a, 71) has put it, or that such conflicts are "now engulfing the world," as Stanley Kober (1993, 82) would have it.

Because nationalism, or hypernationalism, was a cause of World Wars I and II in Europe, a concern about its reappearance there is certainly reasonable (see, e.g., Mearsheimer 1990; Van Evera 1990-1991). But nationalism remains strong not only in eastern Europe but in peaceful western Europe as well. Few national differences there are being expressed in violence, in threats of violence, or in once fashionable messianic visions about changing the world to reflect the national perspective (see Howard 1991, chaps. 2 and 4). Yet that does not necessarily mean that western Europeans are less nationalistic than they were in the 1920s or the 1890s. Do the British (many of them distinctly unamused by the prospects of the new channel tunnel) love the French any more or less than in days of yore? Do Italians think of themselves less as Italians? Closer economic relations in Europe may only suggest that it has finally dawned on those countries that there is benefit in economic cooperation, not that Europeans love each other any more or that

3. For Vaclav Havel's criticism-inspiring comments about "ethnic cleansing" of Germans and Hungarians by the Czechoslovak republic at the end of World War II, see Obrman (1993). See also Bell-Fialkoff (1993).

they identify themselves more now as Europeans. German unification was a spectacular (and peaceful) triumph of national desire: if German nationalism had been truly dampened, one might have expected two Germanys to have emerged when the Soviets left, but instead, the general conclusion was that an independent East Germany made no sense, and the Germans rushed into each other's arms.

Nationalism can lead to war and turmoil, of course, but as the experience in western Europe suggests, it does not have to be eradicated for peace to prevail. France and Germany today do not by any means agree about everything but, shattering the pattern of the century previous to 1945, they no longer even conceive of using war or the threat of war to resolve their disagreements.

It will be of great interest to see if that attitude has infected eastern Europe as the countries there chart their destinies. For the most part, they did remarkably well at avoiding violence during their liberation from Soviet rule; that may lead one to hope that, despite national violence and despite the Yugoslav case, international war, at least, can be avoided in the area. Indeed, nationalism could well be a constructive force: if Poland survives its current test of trauma and turmoil, Polish nationalism will probably have been an important strength.

Moreover, there are at least four important developments that may act to reduce the frequency and intensity of at least some local wars in Europe and elsewhere.

First, as communism died, so did many romantic myths about revolution. Over the last two centuries many pundits, philosophers, and political activists have waxed enthusiastic over the alleged cleansing effects of violent revolution.⁴ And, most specifically, communism has for decades preached that successful revolutions and wars of liberation in the Third World would be followed by social, political, and economic bliss. The disasters that followed the successful revolutions in Vietnam and elsewhere principally cleansed the world of the notion that revolution can be cleansing. In the process, a political construct that has inspired cauldrons of ink and acres of blood has been unceremoniously abandoned.

Second, as violent revolution has become discredited, peaceful democratic reform has begun to look pretty good by comparison. As a result, the democratic idea has flared up throughout the world. Democracy is an imper-

4. For example, in a multiple-award-winning book about Vietnam, American journalist Frances Fitzgerald (1972) fairly glowed with anticipation at what successful revolutionaries could bring to Southeast Asia: "When 'individualism' and its attendant corruption gives way to the revolutionary community," she breathlessly anticipated, "the narrow flame of revolution . . . [will] cleanse the lake of Vietnamese society from the corruption and disorder of the American war" (pp. 589-90).

fect but often effective method for resolving local conflicts peacefully. Moreover, contrary to conventional expectations, it often seems to have been remarkably easy to institute.⁵

Third, although few local wars were directly initiated by the major belligerents in the Cold War, quite a few wars were aggravated by interfering Cold War contestants. Indeed, a central tenet of communist ideology was that violent revolutionary conflict was pretty much inevitable, and that the communist states were duty bound to help out. Meanwhile, the western policy of containment often suggested that force would have to be used to oppose this thrust. At times the big countries in the contest restrained—or tried to restrain—their smaller clients. But more often they jumped in. In addition to Korea, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Lebanon (1958), India, Afghanistan, and Grenada, where troops from the United States, the Soviet Union, and/or China became directly involved, the Cold War can be said to have exacerbated violent conflict within Thailand, Burma, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Venezuela, Cuba, Greece, Peru, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Cambodia, Laos, Angola, India, Mozambique, Chile, Congo, Brazil, Ethiopia, Algeria, Iraq, various Yemens, Hungary, Zanzibar, South Africa, Guyana, French Indochina, Malaysia, Iran, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

With the demise of the Cold War, it is to be expected that such exacerbation will not take place. To the extent that this means that fewer foreign arms and less aid will now be infiltrated to the local contenders, violence will be lower: indeed, by 1991 arms sales to what was still being called the Third World had dropped to one third of their 1985 peak (Wright 1993). By 1993 they had dropped another 20% (Schmitt 1993). However, experience suggests that encouragement and sophisticated arms are not required for local warriors to prosper and to commit mayhem, so the improvement is by no means total.

Fourth, whereas cooperation was extremely difficult to bring about during the Cold War because East and West were locked in an intensely competitive

5. On this issue, see Mueller (1992). In early 1989, Robert Dahl suggested that it would be surprising if the proportion of the countries in the world that are democratic “were to change greatly over the next twenty years” (p. 264). Earlier, Dahl (1971) had concluded that “in the future as in the past,” democracy is “more likely to result from rather slow evolutionary processes than from the revolutionary overthrow of existing hegemonies . . . [and] the transformation of hegemonic regimes” into democracies “is likely to remain a slow process, measured in generations” (pp. 45, 47). For a generally pessimistic assessment about the prospects for democracy, see Huntington (1984). In 1975 Daniel Patrick Moynihan concluded gloomily that

liberal democracy on the American model increasingly tends to the condition of monarchy in the 19th century: a holdover form of government, one which persists in isolated or peculiar places here and there, and may even serve well enough for special circumstances, but which has simply no relevance to the future. It is where the world was, not where it is going. (p. 6)

On such predictions, see Muravchik (1992, chap. 6).

struggle, both sides now have a strong incentive in most places to cooperate to generate peace and stability. However, they probably will be stirred to significant cooperative action—sending their troops into harm’s way—only in those few remaining areas where they feel their interests to be importantly engaged. For the most part, they are likely to cheer from the sidelines as they encourage organizations like the United Nations to take over the singularly unglamorous work of peacekeeping and peace enforcing in peripheral areas (see Urquhart 1993). Some lives will be lost by the peacekeepers, but if the organizational structure of such operations is arranged so that losses are suffered by comparative faceless international volunteers and not by identifiable national units, the domestic political impact in individual countries will be attenuated.

A contrast of the edgy tedium of Cyprus and Northern Ireland with the dramatic catastrophe of Bosnia suggests that the patient police work carried out in Nicosia and Belfast has probably saved thousands of lives over the years.⁶ With the demise of the Cold War competition, such ventures become far more possible, as East and West find themselves on the same side of many conflicts. Indeed, of the 26 peacekeeping missions the United Nations undertook between 1945 and 1992, fully 12 were begun after 1988 in the wake of the Cold War (Priol 1992). The United Nations’ peacekeeping budget quadrupled from \$700 million in 1991 to \$2.8 billion in 1992 (*New York Times* 12 December 1992, 12).

In addition, with the application of economic sanctions to Iraq in 1990, to Haiti in 1991, and to Serbia in 1992, the big countries may be honing a credible, inexpensive, and potentially potent new weapon for use against small- and medium-size aggressors and troublemakers. Essentially, they have been able to demonstrate that the world can get along quite well without the economic participation of such countries, and that, in their new era of comparative harmony, they can inflict enormous pain on such countries at remarkably little cost to themselves.

6. But it tends to be a profoundly thankless job because the people whose lives have been saved do not know who they are, and they are often critical or even contemptuous of their unappreciated saviors. The mission to Somalia in 1992-1993 helped to bring order to an anarchic and deadly situation that was causing a famine, reportedly killing at its peak thousands of people per day. Within a few months that figure had been brought down to two or three a day. Unlike the Gulf War which *cost* lives, however, this spectacularly successful military mission which merely *saved* large numbers of lives brought no calls for celebratory parades. The American troops who helped pull it off remember it most for the boredom and for the teenagers who cursed them (in English) and pelted them with stones and fruit (Lorch 1993). Asked if the mission was worth it, one Army specialist responded, “How many Americans did we lose? Seven? Well, not one of those lives was worth it. . . . Heck, a lot of these people didn’t even let us help them” (Fineman 1993). *New York Times* columnist William Safire (1993) has blandly observed of the venture that “the saving of hundreds of thousands of lives is no small thing.” What, one might wonder, would he consider to be a *large* thing? A carefully calibrated comparison would be difficult, but it seems possible that never in human history has so much been done for so many at such little cost.

SHIFTING DEFINITIONS

To inspire or justify worry in the wake of the Cold War, trouble spotters have ingeniously changed the meanings of several key words. One of these is *stability*. During the Cold War, instability was characteristically equated with the dangers of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. It may not be completely irrelevant to recall in this regard that there was a time a few years ago when very many people were consumed by the concern that such a war might break out. Remember the sword of Damocles? Remember the two scorpions in a bottle? Remember the ticking doomsday clock on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*?

In 1945, the usually prescient American diplomat Joseph Grew concluded, "A future war with the Soviet Union is as certain as anything in this world" (cited in Gaddis 1987, 218n). In 1950, Arnold J. Toynbee wrote, "In our recent Western history war has been following war in an ascending order of intensity; and today it is already apparent that the War of 1939-45 was not the climax of this crescendo movement" (p. 4). Meanwhile, Albert Einstein (1960) was certain that "unless we are able, in the near future, to abolish the mutual fear of military aggression, we are doomed" (p. 533). In 1960, strategist and futurist Herman Kahn wrote, "I have a firm belief that unless we have more serious and sober thought on various aspects of the strategic problem . . . we are not going to reach the year 2000—and maybe not even the year 1965—without a cataclysm" (p. x). C. P. Snow (1961) assured his listeners that unless nuclear weapons were restricted, it was a "certainty" that within "at the most, ten years, some of those [nuclear] bombs are going off" (p. 259). Realist Hans J. Morgenthau concluded in 1979 that "the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable to survive for long" (cited in Boyle 1985, 73). In 1982, Jonathan Schell proclaimed in a best-seller that "one day—and it is hard to believe that it will not be soon—we will make our choice. Either we will sink into the final coma and end it all or, as I trust and believe, we will awaken to the truth of our peril . . . and rise up to cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons" (p. 231). As late as 1987, polls found that nearly one quarter of the American population considered the threat of war to be the most important problem facing the country (Mueller 1994, table 45).

The earth has hardly become cleansed of nuclear weapons, but with the evaporation of the Cold War it is surely clear that, as Gates (1993) puts it, "the danger of a major war in Europe or global thermonuclear war has diminished nearly to the vanishing point." Thus, if stability is considered to

be enhanced whenever the major nuclear countries move farther from conflict with each other, the world fairly wallows in stability today.⁷

For doomsayers there are two ways out of the dilemma posed by this seemingly desirable development. One is blithely to deny that the threat of thermonuclear war was really all that big a deal. Thus Karen Elliott House (1992) of the *Wall Street Journal* has calmly concluded that “the post-Cold War world is less threatening only in the simplistic sense that superpower confrontation, for the time being, is a thing of the past.” Accordingly, decades of trauma and fear are casually dismissed out of hand.

The other is deftly to finesse the definition and argue that localized blood feuds and border conflicts are now to be considered signs of instability. But to be consistent, one would then have to suggest, as I have above, that the Cold War by that standard was also very unstable because blood feuds and border conflicts happened all over the place and because Great Power conflict was often real or potential in many of them.

Other words with new definitions are *major war* and *global conflict*. Before 1989, major wars or global conflicts were conflagrations in which the big countries became viscerally and directly involved: the kind of thing that happened in World Wars I and II. However, former President Jimmy Carter made a speech about foreign policy at the 1992 Democratic National Convention (a distinct rarity at that venue) in which he announced that there were 35 “major wars” going on in the world. As he explained it later, he designated a major war as any conflict in which at least 1,000 people had been killed (MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, 15 February 1993). Thus he took a standard

7. It might also be pointed out, as Huntington (1993b) does in passing, that “military conflict among Western states is unthinkable” (p. 39). Because disagreement among the major states of Europe, once the most warlike of continents, has been the chief source of massive war in the last few centuries, this remarkable development may deserve more than casual notice. Evan Luard (1986) has pointed out, “Given the scale and frequency of war during the preceding centuries in Europe, this is a change of spectacular proportions: perhaps the single most striking discontinuity that the history of warfare has anywhere provided” (p. 77; see also Howard 1991, 176; Keegan 1993, 59; Mueller 1989, forthcoming). Another related development ought to be celebrated—or at least acknowledged. Western foreign policy after 1945 had not one, but two, major themes. Because of its trauma, vast scope, and dramatic intricacies, one of these themes, the contest with international communism, garnered the bulk of the attention. However, the other policy theme—bringing the defeated enemy countries of Germany and Japan into the responsible family of nations and keeping them from repeating what they had done in World War II—has inspired far less notice (although policy *failure* in this case would clearly have been of cosmic concern). Although Japan and Germany were the principal charters of their own destinies, western efforts to guide, nudge, assist, browbeat, bribe, and encourage them along the path they took deserve credit as well. In the process, Germany and Japan have been converted from violent and intensely destructive enemies into prosperous friends, allies, and peaceful competitors whose perspective on the world is much the same as that of the western victors. As policies go, this may well be among the greatest triumphs of enlightened self-interest in history.

definition for war (see Singer and Small 1972, 49) and relabeled it major war. For Carter, apparently, wars are like olives: they are all at least gigantic.

Similarly, in a review in the *New York Times* of a book by Michael Howard that came out before the Gulf War, Herbert Mitgang (1991) argued that the following observation of Howard's is *prescient*: "The one place in the world today where a global conflict might still conceivably originate is the Persian Gulf." That statement could be considered prescient only if one elevates the Gulf War to the status of global conflict. Mitgang adds, rather opaquely, that "after two World Wars, it's hard to distinguish local wars from large-scale wars." One would have thought it would continue to be easy to discriminate: the differences, after all, are not really all that subtle.

Another sleight of tongue seems to have been carried out for what Woolsey (1993) calls *weapons of mass destruction* (see also Krauthammer 1991, 30). At one time, the phrase was taken to refer to nuclear arms, but somewhere along the line it came to refer as well to chemical ones—devices that are far less effective at killing.

This deft exercise in redefinition may help to solve a problem for the professional doomsayers who have been beating their breasts about nuclear proliferation for the last several decades. For example, the National Planning Association (1958) anticipated "a rapid rise in the number of atomic powers . . . by the mid-1960s" (p. 42). Snow (1961) sagely predicted in 1960 that "within, at the most, six years, China and several other states [will] have a stock of nuclear bombs" (p. 259). As Stephen Meyer (1984) has shown, there is no technological imperative for countries to obtain nuclear weapons once they have achieved the technical capacity to do so. Britain's sometime defense minister, Denis Healey (1960), remarked that "so far, no country has resisted the temptation to make its own atomic weapons once it has acquired the physical ability to do so" (p. 3). This was not true even then. Canada could have gone nuclear by that time if it had wanted to, and it is Canada's experience that seems to have been more nearly typical (see Mueller 1967). Indeed, one of the most interesting developments in the postwar world has been the slow pace with which nuclear weapons have proliferated. Moreover, several countries—Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan—have actually backed away from or reversed nuclear weapons programs (Graham 1991).⁸

Some of this has no doubt been due to the hostility of the nuclear countries. But much seems as well to be due to the inability of many potential nuclear

8. In a 1977 survey, 800 experts picked Brazil and South Africa as the countries most likely to have nuclear weapons in the "near future," and only 11% were of the (correct) view that there would be no additional nuclear countries by 1982 (Kramer and Russett 1984, 332).

states to see great value in the possession of these expensive weapons. Japan and Germany enjoy great status in the world even though they do not possess nuclear weapons. Would people pay a great deal more attention to Britain or France if they had 50,000 nuclear weapons, or would people pay all that much less if they had none? Israel's nuclear weapons did not keep the Arabs from attacking in 1973, nor did Britain's prevent Argentina's seizure of the Falklands in 1982. And the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the hands of the enveloping allied forces did not cause Saddam Hussein to order his occupying forces out of Kuwait in 1990.

Thus nuclear proliferation has been disappointingly slow from the pessimists' standpoint. But if we can now embellish the definition by adding other weapons and pretending they are the same as nuclear weapons, there is some hope we can worry afresh and with renewed alarm.

One can also, like Woolsey and many others, place special concern on the related proliferation of ballistic missiles. However, as Thomas McNaugher (1990, 32-3) has noted, this preoccupation may be misplaced. For most countries, missiles are expensive and unreliable, and they are vastly inferior to aircraft for delivering chemical and conventional weaponry. Thus it may be wise to encourage countries to waste their money on these weapons systems in preference to having them buy cheaper and more effective airplanes.

RAISING STANDARDS

A caption poised above an old carpet sweeper on display in an exhibit in the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, nicely illustrates the phenomenon of standard raising. "Labor-saving devices like carpet sweepers helped middle-class people satisfy their desire for cleanliness within the home," observes the caption writer. Lest one conclude that this was an improvement however, the writer quickly adds, "Unfortunately, each new development raised standards and expectations for cleanliness, making the ideal as hard as ever to achieve." Things, accordingly, never get better.

Hoffmann (1992), for example, suggests that "a policy of world order would require that the many sources of global or regional turbulence be dealt with in ways that would minimize violent conflict among states, reduce injustice among and within states, and prevent dangerous violations of rights within them" (p. 38). But, as Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky (1993) suggest, Hoffmann sets amazingly high standards for order, "standards never attained in human history." They aptly characterize his conclusion that "the

obstacles to such a policy are formidable” as “the mother of all understatements” (p. 191).

Similarly, Gates (1993) argues that we now live in a world “where instability, turbulence and violence are widespread and where no one can predict the shape of things to come.” That is, the standard he seeks is a fantastic one in which instability, turbulence, and violence have evaporated and where prediction is perfect. Meanwhile Zbigniew Brzezinski (1993) has published an alarmist book in which he argues that “global change is out of control” (p. ix), implying apparently that there was a time when it was notably *in* control. Huntington (1993c) argues that “wherever one turns, the world is at odds with itself” (p. 194), a vague formulation that has always been and always will be true in some sense or other. Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst (1992) has observed that “a clear and present danger has been replaced by unspecified risks and dangers.” Conflict—and therefore trouble, not to mention unspecified risks and dangers—is inevitable because it is impossible for everyone to have exactly the same interests. To yearn for its eradication is essentially absurd.

Relatedly, commentators regularly apply exalted standards to judge the many states of the world that have suddenly become democratic and capitalist. They bemoan the corruption that has attended the development of capitalism in some formerly communist countries, blithely ignoring the facts that the displaced communist system had often been monumentally corrupt and that corruption is often rampant even in highly developed capitalist countries like Japan.⁹ Or they complain about the inability of some newly democratic countries to get things done even as they ignore the presidential campaign of 1992 in democratic America which was largely devoted to noisy moans and groans about the gridlock that is purportedly endemic in that political system.¹⁰

9. A 1990 survey of Moscow residents about economic issues found in some cases that notably anticapitalistic notions were held by substantial numbers of people there. As it happens, the same survey was given in the world center of capitalism, New York City; it found attitudes there to be much the same (see Shiller, Boycko, and Korobov 1991).

10. One analyst notes with alarm that a poll has found that 79% of the Romanian population feels politicians were “ready to promise anything to get votes,” whereas 65% say politicians are more interested in strengthening their own parties than in solving the country’s problems (Shafir 1993, 18). The improbable implication, apparently, is that those numbers would be lower in real democracies like the United States. Another double standard is often applied. When a democracy gets overthrown we say it has failed, but when one dictator topples another we sometimes see this as persistence of form and a kind of stability. But any government can be overthrown by a sufficiently large and dedicated group of thugs with guns. And it is not at all clear that authoritarian governments—fraught with histories of coups and countercoups and with endless battles for succession—are any more stable.

ELEVATING SMALLER PROBLEMS

Finally, when big problems (dragons in Woolsey's characterization) go away, small problems (snakes) can be elevated in perceived importance. Woolsey (1993) has conveniently enumerated the snakes he finds in our new world disorder to be "the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the ballistic missiles to carry them; ethnic and national hatreds that can metastasize across large portions of the globe; the international narcotics trade; terrorism; the dangers inherent in the West's dependence on Mideast oil; new economic and environmental challenges." However, as it happens, none of Woolsey's poisonous snakes are new and some of them are actually of less urgent concern than they were during the Cold War.

As argued above, wars deriving from ethnic and national hatreds are neither new nor increasing in frequency in the world. Nuclear proliferation is no more a new problem—in fact, may well be less of a problem—than it was in 1960 when John Kennedy repeatedly pointed out with alarm that there might be 10, 15, or 20 nations with a nuclear capacity by 1964 (Kraus 1962, 394). The international drug trade has obviously been around for quite some time, whereas the West's supposedly dangerous dependence on Mideast oil has been a matter of pointed concern at least since 1973.

The impact of international terrorism (see Figure 1) has often been more in the exaggerated hysteria it generates than in its actual physical effects. Fewer Americans have been killed by terrorists than have been killed by lightning in the last decade. Indeed, although there was a rise in 1991 at the time of the Gulf War, terrorism has declined in frequency from late Cold War days—mostly because of enhanced prevention measures and better international police work. Few seem to remember how frequent and fashionable airline hijackings once were, and even fewer remember the enormous concern generated during the Cold War era by the Red Brigades in Italy, the Baader-Meinhoff gang in Germany, the Red Guards in Japan, and the Symbionese Liberation Army in the United States.¹¹ Despite all this, however, Gates (1993) confidently predicts that "there will be a steady increase in the resort to terrorism."

Economic and environmental challenges are hardly new either, but new alarms can be raised. Some have sighted a dangerous new enemy out there on the economic front: insidiously peaceful Japan. Those of the "Flash! Japan buys Pearl Harbor!" school, like Huntington (1991), argue that we must now

11. On successful Spanish and French police work against Basque terrorists, see *New York Times*, 11 March 1993, A5.

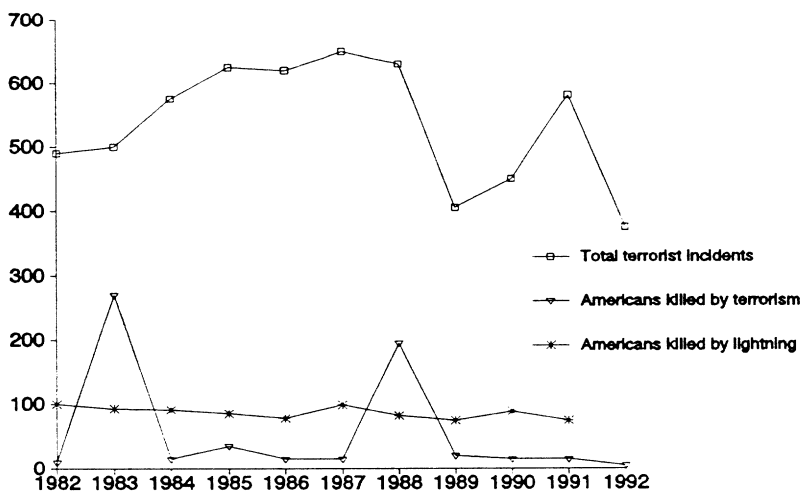


Figure 1: International terrorism and lightning, 1982-1992.

SOURCES: United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, January 1988, April 1993; National Safety Council (Chicago), *Accident Facts*, various issues.

fear not *missile vulnerability* but *semiconductor vulnerability*. He warns us, apparently seriously, that “economics is the continuation of war by other means” (p. 10). He admonishes that the issue now is whether the United States “can meet the economic challenge from Japan as successfully as it did the political and military challenges from the Soviet Union” (p. 16). If not, the United States is destined to lose its “primacy in a crucial arena of power.”¹² Danger signals arise, he argues, because Japan has become the largest provider of foreign aid and because it has shockingly endowed professorships at Harvard and MIT (Huntington 1993a, 77, 80).

By mid-1993, however, the Japanese economy had gone into a slump whereas the U.S. economy was beginning to look pretty good. Huntington, ever the most flexible and inventive of doomsayers, now extrapolated from the civil war in Bosnia and proclaimed that, actually, the “fundamental cause of conflict” henceforth will *not* be “primarily ideological or primarily economic. [Rather], the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (Huntington 1993b, 22). There are, it turns out, some seven or eight major civilizations in the world, and these civiliza-

12. The concept of economic war comes close to being oxymoronic. There are times when it may make some sense (as when the world ganged up in 1990 against Iraq), but war is substantially zero (or negative) sum whereas economic exchange, although not always fully fair or equal, is generally positive sum—both parties gain (see Jervis 1993, 57-8).

tions are destined to clash mightily, mostly along “the fault lines separating these civilizations from one another” (Huntington 1993b, 25).¹³ Western civilization primarily supported the creation of a state in Bosnia that would be dominated by people from the Islamic civilization, but this troubles Huntington so little that he ignores the issue entirely (pp. 37-8), so busy is he assuring us that the western ideas of “liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets” have “little resonance” in places like liberal, law-abiding, democratic, constitutional, capitalistic Japan (p. 40).¹⁴

Or there are other problems. In his pessimistic best-seller of 1993, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, historian Paul Kennedy is able to work up quite a bit of concern over pollution, immigration, and robotics. Interestingly enough, war, a central preoccupation of his pessimistic best-seller of 1987, has apparently vanished from his worries: the word “war” does not even appear in the index of his later book.

Additionally, of course, one can always find domestic concerns about which to worry. Brzezinski finds turmoil everywhere and blames much of it on material wealth, on self-indulgence, and on that perennial recipient of potshots, television. Or we can rediscover hate and racial problems as if they had never existed before, moan about the economic problems caused by the fact that people live too long and medical care has gotten too good,¹⁵ agonize over whether it has become necessary to raise gasoline taxes or to reregulate cable TV.

Or we can worry that Americans “are being overwhelmed, even paralyzed” by all the choices that confront them in the marketplace. Thus, David Goslin asserts, “As social scientists, we know that with an increase in choices, people tend to become more anxious”; sociologist Todd Gitlin points out that “if you have infinite choice, people are reduced to passivity”; and futurist Alvin Toffler worries about “overchoice—the point at which the advantage

13. On the other hand, Huntington (1993c) also argues that “wars occur most frequently between societies with high levels of interaction” (p. 192), so violent clashes presumably are even more likely *within* civilizations.

14. Huntington (1993c) challenges his (many) critics to produce “a better explanation for what is going on in the world” (p. 194). One that suggests itself is Thomas Friedman’s observation (1992b) that the world is being divided into forward-looking states like Japan, which effortlessly produces superb products like the Lexus automobile, and backward-looking ones like Serbia, which fight over who owns which cherry tree. Although the Lexus builders of the world are willing to expend money and a small number of lives to help the cherry tree battlers settle their disputes, they are principally determined, failing coherent resolution of these conflicts, to contain and isolate such conflicts while they continue pursuing their primary goal—to become even richer (see also Rosecrance 1986).

15. In 1993, it was announced that life expectancy at birth for Americans had risen to a record 75.5 years. So boring was this news that the *New York Times* simply reprinted an Associated Press dispatch on the issue and buried it on the 13th page of its September 1 issue.

of diversity and individualization are canceled by the complexity of the buyer's decision-making process" (cited in Williams 1990). Clearly, if Hamlet was faced by only two alternatives and found himself agonizing over them for five full acts, we must be far, far worse off today. This conundrum seems to be an updated version of the classic Aristotelian puzzle known as "Buridan's ass" in which the animal is placed at an equal distance from two bundles of hay and eventually starves to death in terminal indecision. There seems to be no evidence that any ass ever actually underwent this agony, but the information thus far is merely anecdotal, and this might well be one of those many issues crying out for well-funded systematic research.¹⁶

THE CATASTROPHE QUOTA

In all, then, misanthropes and curmudgeons can take unaccustomed cheer. Even in a state of considerable peace there will still be plenty about which to complain and worry: the catastrophe quota will always remain comfortably full. Even though the chances of a global thermonuclear catastrophe (a humongous war on Carter's scale, presumably) have diminished to the point where remarkably few even worry about it anymore, one can concentrate on more vaporous enemies like trouble, chaos, uncertainty, unpredictability, instability, and unspecified risks and dangers. These are enemies that—like economics, civilization, and choice—will always reassuringly be with us.

Michael Howard (1991) has observed that "each new generation is presented with new problems and new challenges" (p. 5). That is certainly true, but one can still perhaps pause to celebrate such passing achievements as the eradication of smallpox or the decline of the threat of global thermonuclear war and to suggest that a world without such terrors is actually better than one with them. But for all that, it really does appear that if we ever enter Truman's wonderful golden age, we will never notice. "Status quo," as Ronald Reagan reportedly liked to put it, is Latin for "the mess we're in."

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16. In one area, however, the problem may solve itself. If customers in supermarkets become paralyzed with anxious indecision in front of, for example, corn flakes, they will block the aisles. This will reduce the profits of the store owner who will then logically be forced to increase the aisle space which will in turn reduce the choice angst confronting the previously hapless customer.

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