

THE CERTAINTY OF FAILURE

To find a new sense of direction, [we] will need to incorporate the certainty of failure, . . . [for] if failure is expected, and studied, it need not destroy courage.

Theodore Zeldin¹

We are on the cusp of a megacrisis formed by the coincidence of two historical cycles: the lesser geopolitical cycle of war and peace and the greater civilizational cycle of rise and fall. If those who govern us were saints advised by geniuses, and if the populace were eager to embrace change, there might be some possibility of turning this epochal crisis into a grand opportunity to reframe civilization to be both humane and ecological. Unfortunately, it is more likely that events will spin out of control, engendering widespread destruction and chaos. Indeed, we cannot exclude the possibility of a deep collapse entailing the radical impoverishment and simplification of society—in effect, the end of industrial civilization as we know it.

To elaborate on the nature of the crisis, the Pax American that has sustained world order for over seventy years has moved into a terminal phase. The structure of treaties, alliances, institutions, and understandings undergirding that order has been slowly disintegrating due to profound changes in geopolitical conditions since 1945, most notably the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of Communist China, and the shattering of the Middle East. Major shifts in both economy and ecology have also radically transformed the world and spawned a host of intractable challenges—such as anthropogenic climate change, which

¹ *An Intimate History of Humanity* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 18

epitomizes the tragedy of the commons. Hence the post-WW II settlement no longer accords with reality. Nor does it still enjoy widespread support. To the contrary, disgruntled masses have recently given complacent elites on both sides of the Atlantic a rude shock, and there may be more in store. What is worse, after decades marked by the absence of major war, the sound of sabers rattling is heard once more.²

A two-hundred and fifty year-old industrial civilization is also entering its terminal phase. It is mostly failing to come to grips with the problems occasioned by its success, and it exhibits all of the major contradictions that have driven past civilizations toward decline and fall—ecological stress, overpopulation, resource exhaustion, excessive complexity, loosened morals, burgeoning indebtedness, social strife, blatant corruption, and political dysfunction.³ As indicated in a previous essay, we seem destined to return to something resembling the state of human civilization prior to the fossil-fuel era—that is, to live in solar-agrarian societies in which most of the luxuries and freedoms afforded by an abundance of energy slaves are no longer available.⁴

It is difficult to imagine that such momentous change, tantamount to a collective nervous breakdown, could occur peacefully and incrementally. Indeed, transitions from one age to another in the past have been tumultuous in the extreme. Thus the “calamitous” 14th century described by historian Barbara Tuchman may hold up a mirror to our own future—not as an exact preview of

² For more on the cycle of war and peace, see Peter Turchin, *War and Peace and War* (New York: Plume, 2007)

³ For more on the cycle of civilizations, see my *Immoderate Greatness: Why Civilizations Fail* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2012)

⁴ “The Shape of a Future Civilization”

coming attractions, but as a salutary reminder of the anarchy, chaos, and, above all, madness we are likely to experience as the old order breaks down.⁵ What Tuchman's work may not reflect is the greater speed and intensity of the process in our case. The breakup of the medieval order began in the early 14th century and lasted until well into the 15th. Our time of troubles will probably be both shorter and more intense, with the suffering proportional to the intensity.

So the question is not whether we will experience turmoil and suffering as the crisis unfolds, only how bad they will be. Which raises the issue of how to respond. Is it reasonable to think that we can steer such an epochal transition to some desired end state? Or will we be doing well just to keep our heads above water and to limit the damage? And given the fear of change and the limits of persuasion outlined in a previous essay, can we hope to convert woodenheaded elites and obdurate masses to a radically new and different world view in time to make a managed transition possible?⁶ Given the immensity of the crisis outlined above, and the speed with which it seems destined to unfold, it is far more likely that a cascade of untoward events will prove to be mostly unmanageable and overwhelmingly destructive. An immoderately great civilization will have its luxuriant overgrowth ruthlessly pruned away; hubris will be followed by nemesis.

In this light, we are obliged to accept the certainty of failure and to lay our plans accordingly. The worst-case scenario is that deep collapse will cause us to fall into a dark age in which the arts and adornments of civilization are partially or totally lost. We therefore need to establish arks, storehouses, and banks to preserve

⁵ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (NY: Random House, 2014)

⁶ "The Perfect Storm"

the knowledge, skills, and materials with which to reconstitute a complex civilization. To be clear, this does not mean providing protected enclaves for a favored few—that would be an exercise in futility, like fortifying the fo’c’sle of a sinking ship. Nor does it mean lessening efforts to forestall or mitigate collapse. To persevere as long as any hope remains is a moral imperative. But we must at the same time acknowledge the extremity of the situation and the limits of our powers. No ship is unsinkable, and long experience has taught prudent mariners to provision lifeboats and practice abandoning ship against the eventuality of shipwreck. We should do no less by bequeathing posterity the tools it will need to erect a new civilization from the ruins of the old.⁷

⁷ See *Immoderate Greatness*, 67-68 and n 12

