

29.8 Henry A. Myers, "Now, in the Twenty-First Century"

As the twenty-first century dawns, most age-old questions and issues are still with us. History certainly does not repeat itself in any mechanical way—technological inventions by themselves assure that—but history does give us an idea of the options available to humankind in coping with challenges. What follows is an attempt to identify some of the main challenges and review of the range of possible reactions to them.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

As people centuries from now look back at the twentieth century, they may well give it the short name "Age of Social-Doc-trine Conflict." Particularly in its core decades, roughly 1914–1990, no previous period in world history saw such continual struggle—coercive, psychological, and diplomatic—among protagonists of ideologies, with conflicts over nationalism, democracy, militarism, fascism, and communism, all in many variations, casting the longest shadows. Since the end of the cold war, the last four of these have faded somewhat as causes of conflict, whereas nationalism—in the sense of a force fueling struggles over ethnic claims—has assumed central importance.

As we have seen, nationalism is a powerful ideology, but it is more than a social doctrine: At the moment, it is a rationale for expansion and has had genocidal consequences; in fact, two of the most prolonged and wanton instances of mass killing since World War II, in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, have taken place since the end of the cold war over "ethnic rivalries," which is a current media synonym for "nationalism." A third instance, in Cambodia had different, cold war–related roots. Although it is true that protagonists of "-isms" from Stalin and Hitler to Pol Pot hold an unchal-lenged world record for mass killings with tens of millions of victims in the twentieth century, it is also true that people seem able to recover more easily from even the rabid behavior induced by the worst of social doctrines than from ethnic hatreds. Identities based on "-isms" can be discarded. Most of the former believers in Italian Fascism or German Nazism abandoned their doctrinal persuasion with the defeat of their leaders—at least enough to blend in with the rest of their national populations. Former Communists in Russia are able to do the same thing; however, ethnic identities are nearly impossible to discard. There is no such thing as a former Bosnian Serb or former Hutu. The likelihood is that intense ethnic conflict will continue to plague the twenty-first century.

INTERNATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

If ethnic conflict is a fact of world life, the only responses are either to let the conflicts burn themselves out, until victors have subdued weaker enemies at high human cost, or to intervene. Intervention here means the use of outside, international forces to establish and keep peace among the warring parties. This role was seen as a main one for the League of Nations after World War I. The United Nations' stronger structure than its predecessor's and an American commitment to it raised high hopes in 1945 after World War II for its future as international peacekeeper.

Actually, for the half century after World War II, the United Nations did not work significantly better than the League of Nations in its peacekeeping role. It did establish the uneasy peace that followed the war establishing Israel with the partition of Palestine, and it kept peace most of the time on Cyprus—a very meager record of efficacy from a global-peacekeeping standpoint. Some of its members contributed to the Korean War, but the Korean War was waged by the United Nations only because the Soviet Union was boycotting the organization during crucial proceedings while Chinese seats in the United Nations were held by the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan rather than by that of Mao Tse-tung on the Chinese mainland. The power to veto Security Council actions, which was given to the former main allies from World War II as its permanent members, meant that a veto could be expected any time a cold war conflict called for UN intervention, and nearly all significant international hostilities after 1946 were cold war conflicts or became so with Third World countries in surrogate roles. This state of affairs called the North Atlantic Treaty Organiza-tion (NATO) into being. Its members were not all North Atlantic countries, which the name implies; rather, they were united by a determination to prevent further Soviet expansion in Europe. In this original role, NATO worked well: After its formation, the USSR did not expand any farther into Europe, although its detractors could claim that it was not NATO but the U.S. Strategic Air Command that was the real deterrent to Soviet expansion. Others minimized Soviet expansionist tendencies, but NATO appeared justified to its supporters largely because the United Nations was incapable of doing its peacekeeping job.

With the cold war over, NATO should theoretically be unnecessary. In the absence of expected vetoes, the United Nations can return to its original role, that of international peacekeeper. It is true that China is still a Communist country, but there are so few other Communist countries and causes that they should not keep the Security Council from working most of the time. It appears, however, that NATO members have not the slightest intention of disbanding; in fact, NATO forces have done far more fighting as NATO forces since the end of the cold war than during it. The simple fact appears to be that leaders of the NATO countries, with at least the passive support of the people who elected them, prefer NATO

as an organization of countries more like their own—more stable, more democratic, and more predictable—than any random sampling of UN countries.

People in other parts of the world seem to feel the same way, preferring to have conflicts in their areas countered with forces from countries resembling their own. In West Africa, that force was the Economic Organization of West African States (ECOWAS), which began as a free-trade association but developed military forces in the Economic Organization [of West African States] Monitoring Observer Group (ECOMOG). Under the leadership of Nigeria, ECOMOG successfully intervened in the Sierra Leonean civil war and established much more peaceful conditions than any other force did after the May 1997 coup. Nigeria ran out of money to maintain its forces throughout the country, and so ECOMOG could not continue to enforce peace; but the point is that for more than a year this West African regional organization, rather than the United Nations, exercised peacekeeping functions in that country far better than the United Nations has been doing with its belated and less-than-focused effort there in 2000. The outlook, then, is for international but regional organizations to conduct peacekeeping operations, with the United Nations remaining mostly in the background.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

With the rapid expansion of computer usage in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the gap in the standard of living between the developed North, with its increasingly digital economy and society, and the underdeveloped and distinctly less digital South has widened. The lines drawn are approximately those of the old First World (North) and Third World (South) of the cold war era, with the peoples of the Soviet bloc or Second World struggling with varying success to join the old First World in living standards. Almost no one opposes aid to alleviate poverty in the underdeveloped world; however, there is little current enthusiasm for how the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund has been tackling the problem with more loans, which often have not only failed to do much for progress in the underdeveloped countries but also left them with impossibly large sums to repay.

Immigration pressures on the developed world appear to be increasing. They keep the Mexican-American border porous in spite of U.S. efforts to control illegal entry and lead to tragedies such as that of the forty-seven Chinese who in June 2000 suffocated in a sealed truck at the port of Dover, in England. As the Digital Divide widens, people from the old Third World will desperately seek First-World jobs. This kind of pressure cannot be alleviated without making the old Third World considerably more like the First World economically. This means some—probably massive—displacement of local institutions and ways of life and, if past experience holds true, will lead to charges of imperialism, as if out of pure arrogance the new First Worlders wanted to refashion the poorer part of the globe into one that resembled their own. There will probably be increasing environmental concerns here as well. Cutting down rain forests may well continue to appeal to Brazilians as a means of gaining income and as a step toward developing Brazil's economy into one that provides well-paying jobs.

GLOBALIZATION AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

In the twentieth century, many countries, including the United States, saw internal political disagreement over how good an idea it was to strengthen international organizations and encourage global interaction, as opposed to focusing on domestic issues and aspirations. Protagonists of a more global outlook were the “internationalists” of the twentieth century, who were apt to term their opponents “isolationists.” The 1990s saw a shift in enthusiasms and fears concerning globalization, and in the early twenty-first century the term centers most of all on international free trade or global capitalism. Large-scale business, which in the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century was inclined in most countries to favor tariffs and other restrictions on aspects of trade in which their countries could not compete well, adopted a much more international outlook. From the 1950s to the 1990s, politically conservative groups in the capitalistic countries increasingly favored free trade, whereas groups directed toward labor interests, human rights concerns, and environmental questions favored it less. There are exceptions, of course, but in general it is accurate to say that in the early twenty-first century, the right favors globalization with more fervor than the left.

Part of the reason for this is the growing association of globalization with the expanded role of multinational corporations. Democratic parties of the left had no problem with globalization in the twentieth century as long as it meant more cultural interchange and more authority for international organizations over national ones. However, if globalization today means increasing free trade with multinational corporations as the main players, this implies some restriction or stagnation of the public sphere at the expense of the private one.

Overall, the increasing public interest in economic developments—where private businesses, not governments, are the main players—is leaving government and politics in a less important role than before. Radio and television stations in the early twenty-first century report far more business and general economic news than they did a few decades earlier at the expense of governmental or political news. In doing so, they are appealing to what their publics consider to be important. Even public radio stations in the United States devote what thirty years ago would have seemed to be a dispropor-

tionate amount of time to reporting on “the marketplace.” Globalization, the relatively good record of capitalism in the public mind in democratic countries, and the decreased interest in government and politics seem at least partly interrelated, with no change in that relationship in sight.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The failure of the United Nations to establish peace through its own interventions does not obscure the fact that the claims of human rights are taken more seriously in the early twenty-first century than before. NGOs and regional organizations are increasingly active and visible today. This raises the issue of national sovereignty and globalization from another perspective: How much sovereignty will nation-states have to give up to comply with the decisions of international bodies? After all, nation-states as we know them did not dominate the world map until the nineteenth century, and not completely until the twentieth century. Although more of them may emerge—a Palestinian one and one or more to establish more stable borders for peoples in the eastern Congo region and their neighbors—they appear to be subject to increasing influence by international, particularly regional, bodies.

As a sign of increased empowerment of women, the twentieth century saw four quite effective women prime ministers in different countries: Israel’s Golda Meir, India’s Indira Gandhi, Britain’s Margaret Thatcher, and Pakistan’s Benazir Bhutto, whereas Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi has been a leading and effective voice of the opposition to military dictatorship there for many years. There is enough consensus worldwide on the need to upgrade women’s role in society to assure that the general trend toward treating women more as equals to men will continue, although the road in that direction is full of rough spots.

Internationally, the quest for women’s rights runs into questions not only of national sovereignty but of different cultures’ providing different standards of human rights. Are there really such things as “Asian rights” and “Muslim rights,” for example, in which the group takes precedence over the individual, youth defers to age, and women defer to men, or do these attitudes and behaviors represent historical artifacts that might have claimed validity through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but can no longer be defended in the twenty-first?

The evidence is overwhelming that the acceleration of economic, political, and social change in the twentieth century resulted in greater homogenization and less cultural diversity in the world. Against this background, China’s special pleading for “Asian values” when accused of human rights abuses, such as harvesting kidneys and other human organs from prisoners, is a sham. Yet in Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, and other parts of the world, human rights activists are perceived as but another example of Western cultural imperialism. It seems possible that the seductive appeal of Western values, including human rights, will prove so strong that regional or cultural exceptionalism will not last to the twenty-second century. Nonetheless, the inherent tensions between the Western world’s economic, political, and social values, including human rights, and the non-Western world’s religious and cultural traditions will continue to collide and could well boil over into conflict. Thus, for example, a rich and powerful champion of non-Western values, such as Libya’s Mu’ammar al-Gadhafi, could be tempted to order missiles to strike U.S. cities in retaliation for America’s trampling of “Muslim values” in the name of human rights.

THE ASIAN CENTURY

While the United States dominated world events in the second half of the twentieth century and remains the sole superpower after the cold war ended, Asia was increasing in world importance as the century closed. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan developed into stable and prosperous states with economies increasingly important for world trade. China was held back by drastic mismanagement under Mao Tse-tung, but beginning with the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and his system of combining collectivist control with capitalist incentives, China has played an increasingly large role on the global political and economic stage. China has the look of becoming a superpower within a matter of decades. As much as we may say that the cold war is over, it lingers on in Asia with the issue of China and Taiwan, as well as in relations between North and South Korea.

The “One China” policy came to mean something very different from the 1950s through the 1990s. Originally espoused by Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang and endorsed by the United States, it held that the government of the Republic of China (on Taiwan) was the legitimate government of China and anticipated the day when it would return to remove the Communist usurpers from the mainland. Thus Taiwan’s Republic of China successfully laid claim to China’s seats in the United Nations through the 1960s. Then with the increasing legitimization of mainland China’s People’s Republic in the Nixon and Carter administrations, ending with the U.S. recognition of Communist China as the real China and relegating Taiwan to a hazy lesser status, “One China” for the mainland Chinese leadership quickly became the policy of treating Taiwan as a rebellious province of China.

Although it is true that far enough back Taiwan was ruled by China, it is equally true that China controlled Taiwan for only four years in the twentieth century: The Japanese took Taiwan in 1895 and held it until the end of World War II.

Then from 1945 to 1949, Taiwan was indeed under (Kuomintang-run) China; since 1949 it has functioned as an independent state. There are several scenarios for the China-Taiwan issue in this century, with the extremes ranging from a mainland Chinese military conquest of the island to a discrediting and removal of communism in China along the lines of the upheavals that transformed the Soviet Empire into more agreeable successor states in 1989 and 1990. Taiwan could easily become a model for mainland China, having achieved economic wealth and stability along with a democracy strong enough that it enabled the first change of government in which an opposing faction replaced the previously ruling group as a result of free elections in four thousand years of Chinese history. China is still a country that people escape *from*; Taiwan has been a country people escaped *to* in its half century of independence. This speaks loudly for Taiwan as a model; the problem here is that the leaders of China are not looking for a model that will make them unnecessary. To be sure, the same thing could have been said regarding the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s: Soviet leaders were not looking for a model that would relegate them to irrelevance, but events resulting from *perestroika* overtook them.

The Korean case is altogether different. For starters, in Korea—unlike in the China-Taiwan confrontation—the free and prosperous protagonist is at least equal in power to its poor and totalitarian adversary. Famine and general economic deprivation seem to have reached extremes in North Korea sufficient to prod its leadership into accepting aid from South Korea. The recent meeting of the two heads of state seems promising in terms of diffusing tensions; however, there appear to be limits on how unified the country can become as a result of negotiated settlements alone. North Korean Kim Jong Il must know full well that German unification meant the end of East German leaders as anything more than likely defendants in human rights cases, and he can scarcely welcome a Korean unification that bodes the same sort of outcome. Of course, no one asked head of state and Socialist Unity (Communist) Party General Secretary Erich Honecker if he wanted to step down as leader and be considered for trial as a human rights violator. Events simply overtook him, and they may well do the same in Korea. A more realistic scenario is probably one in which Kim Jong Il attempts to use capitalism either as aid for development or to provide incentives for economic progress along the lines of Deng Xiaoping's program, although whether he could do so in the Korean context without drastically undermining his position and the system itself is doubtful.

Inter-Asian conflicts aside, Asia seems poised to take on a larger role on the world stage soon. The sheer size of Asia's population might not be much of a factor in determining Asian influence by itself; after all, India's very large population has done nothing for Indian influence on the global scene. Instead, it is the combination of large populations, economic development, and stable political systems in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the smaller Pacific Rim states that should indeed make an increasing difference in the global balance of trade, cultural influence, military relations, and diplomatic power.

RELIGION AND TECHNOLOGY

Present-day religion tends to be sparingly dealt with in world history textbooks, but it remains a strong thread in the fabric of civilization. America with its stridently secular culture and fervently free market economy is also one of the most religiously vibrant countries in the world. This seeming contradiction raises the obvious question: Why is this the case? In the world at large, what is the appeal of traditional religion in an age so geared to life's material considerations?

Part of the answer to both questions may lie in the ever-growing bureaucratic and technological control of twenty-first-century life. Religion may serve as an antidote to this phenomenon. So, too, the atomization and sense of isolation that is at the center of twenty-first-century materialism may account for the growth in religious affiliation, especially in those religious traditions that offer believers simple answers—simplistic, of course, for critics—to life's problems in an increasingly complex, technological world.

Since the major world religions include a stress on compassion in their sacred books, their influence on world affairs should be benign, as it is in the case of religiously affiliated NGOs. There is a darker side to religious fervor, however, when it reinforces cultural rivalries, as in the case of the Ayatollah Khomeini's traditionalist Shiites in Iran against the West, or ethnic or national confrontations, as between Palestinians and Jews or between Hindus and Pakistanis. Protestant-Catholic tensions show only marginal signs of abating in Northern Ireland, and the atrocities in the Balkans reflect both intra-Christian hostilities between Catholic Croats and Eastern Orthodox Serbs and the even deeper conflicts between Christian populations and Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Beyond the effects of the Digital Divide, one sure thing about the twenty-first century is that its technology will make it different. Here the twentieth-century record is impressive, and the continually accelerating march of technological progress through the past three centuries shows no sign of slowing down. Examples in two fields, communications and medicine, may serve to make this—in contrast with other conjectures about historical trends—an uncontroversial point.

In 1900, hard-rubber, one-sided phonograph records that played for a few minutes sold in the United States for \$3.00 to \$5.00 each, the weekly salary range for average workers. Think of it: three minutes of low-quality audio for your week's wages! Progress in the industry relegated even the greatly improved, double-sided, long-playing, high-fidelity, inexpensive records of the 1950s and 1960s to the status of historical curiosities as audiotape cassettes replaced both

phonograph records and reel-to-reel audiotapes in the 1970s, only to be challenged by longer-lasting CDs with much better sound quality in the 1980s; these in turn have had to compete with new audio products of the computer age. Consumer interest and promising returns for investment in research combine to ensure that new items will fuel the communications revolution well into—perhaps throughout and beyond—the twenty-first century.

The medical picture also seems promising with some surety in the industrial world and at least hope in the developing world. In 1900, diabetes was a terrifying, fatal disease, thought to come “from a fall” and treated with state-of-the-art prescribed mild, and sometimes not so mild, doses of arsenic. In 2000, it is “under control” for most of those who have it. Tuberculosis claimed lives in epidemic proportions in 1900. In 2000, it is rare: The national U.S. organization devoted to combatting it has had to begin fighting other respiratory ailments in order to stay in business, although multi-drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis still present a challenge, particularly in Russia and China, to its complete eradication. Heart disease had no effective treatments in 1900, nor was the relationship of diet to heart problems understood. The discovery of cholesterol and its clogging effect on arteries, along with surgical techniques for heart transplants and coronary-artery by-passes, has added decades to the lives of heart patients, as has research that has developed plastic and metal heart components.

These are only the most obvious improvements in medicine and health care of the past century. They apply foremost to the industrial world, but considerable progress has been made in the developing world as well. Leprosy is still a fact of life in parts of Asia and Africa, but it has been arrested for most victims in most areas. Health problems in underdeveloped areas are often not so much the result of ignorance in medical science as of problems in implementations of programs: The prevention and treatment of malaria has been understood for a long time, but malaria still kills tens of thousands of people annually because political and economic factors keep delivery systems for the medicines from being implemented or sustained. Diarrhea kills countless thousands of African children every year, not because medical science fails to understand cause and effect concerning it, but because the educational effort necessary for its control has been sporadic.

The medical challenge for the twenty-first century will be to see the technology of the Western world implemented by developing countries while pursuing cures in research centers for the still-rampant plagues, particularly AIDS, and other killers and debilitators, notably cancer and spinal-cord injuries. It is estimated that more than 20 million people will have died of AIDS between 1980 and 2005, a number that is beginning to approach world-war-level casualty statistics. In several African countries, HIV-infected people exceed 10 percent of the population. The twentieth century was the first to make any headway against cancer, but even with success stories from early detection and combinations of radiation, surgery, and chemotherapy, much remains to be done. At the moment there is some faint hope—no more than that—for developing remedial, perhaps regeneration-inducing treatments for spinal-cord injuries.

Some technological problems seem to be beyond the mind of humans to solve. In the days of Moses, ax heads would sometimes fly off their handles, occasionally killing someone. In 2000, ax heads are still flying off their handles, even those of molded fiberglass. Persistent technology does, of course, have a proud record of coping with problems of the physical world, and, who knows, the year 2080 or so may even see that nut cracked with an affordable, all-metal but lightweight, one-piece ax.

Such problems as are posed by the ax head and handle are, fortunately, rare. The outlook is for technology to rise to the occasion most of the time in improving humankind’s material standard of living, but this is only a part of the unfolding scenario for life in the twenty-first century. Whether the “Age of Social-Doctrine Conflict” can give rise to an age in which ethnic toleration and human rights come into their own and in which “developing countries” really do develop the capacity for improving their peoples’ standards of living is still a very open question.

Questions:

1. Assuming that present trends will continue can lead to bad predictions, such as one made in 1899—on the basis of the nineteenth-century trend in U.S.–Latin American relations—that by 1999 or 2000 what was then Buenos Aires would be called “McKinleyville.” What present trends in global relations do you think will continue? Which are much less certain?
2. Are there problems with reasoning that (a) since the USSR freed itself from communism with relatively little violence, China can be expected to do the same thing, or (b) since East and West Germany were united quickly and peacefully after forty-five years of separation, the same should be possible soon for North and South Korea? Are these analogies valid?