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civ·i·li·za·tion:

1 a : a relatively high level of cultural and technological development; specifically : the stage of cultural development at which writing and the keeping of written records is attained

b : the culture characteristic of a particular time or place

The Rise and Fall of Civilizations

by Darlow Botha

INTRODUCTION

Keeping records enables humankind to trace the history of human efforts and learn from many “experiments” in civilization on record. As archeologists and anthropologists expand their findings, they discover groups of humans on all continents over a hundred thousands years ago. Some of these groups created societies complex and rich enough to claim the culture, technology and record keeping attributes of “civilization.” As futurists, we must understand how and where humankind has been in the past to envision possible trajectories ahead and discriminate between desirable futures and those we would work to avoid.

One question to ask is, “Does the current world turmoil have the potential to initiate an accelerating decline of Western Civilization (and with it our American hegemony), or – is this an opportunity to exploit all our advantages to start a new direction, and create the first ever recorded history of an all powerful Western civilization morphing into a first ‘World Civilization’?”

The original design of our founders and its great adaptability allowed the United States to save the world from despotic hegemonies almost two centuries later. In the six decades since then, we have helped to recreate countries devastated by war, got involved in skirmishes of dubious value to our future, and been a major player in fantastic strides in knowledge and technology.

Of course, as a systems engineer turned futurist, I have a design – at least as good (?) as where we might be heading now! To perhaps provide some insight as to where we ought to be going, here are some selected examples of rise to empire status and circumstances leading to decline. We see examples of happy combinations of resources, populations and leadership growing to dominate their time, place and culture, creating a civilization.

The Power Elite

The common thread of empire is an elite of those who accrue power and exercise it, in the end to their own perceived interest. To the extent that this “interest” includes the broader interest of the fellow citizens of the civilization in their time and space, they can enjoy a reasonable “RHIP – rank has its privileges” existence; a rising tide lifts all boats. At some point these privileges remove the elite so far from the rest of their society that they create a divisor rather than a multiplier of success for the civilization. As the world shrank, empires were built around tribes, city states, nation states, continents ... Does the future lead to a global civilization, or does it lead to a return to a modern version of chaos and the dark ages?

Time, Place, Culture

From the origins of civilization in Mesopotamia, to civilizations in Africa, the far East, Europe and now the Americas, there has been a long chain of civilizations with “a relatively high level of cultural and technological development” appropriate to their time, place and culture. We might not recognize the culture of England at the time of King John, but it brought the signing of the Magna Carta, a precursor to our own constitution.

Generation and Decay of Civilizations

A conjunction of circumstances initiates a critical mass of people that can create the stability of community in which civilization as defined above can develop. Mesopotamia provided the fertile environment in which agriculture could develop a surplus of sustenance allowing the development of art and records. The corruption that can destroy the civilization may come from external competition or from literal corruption internally.

To illustrate the “rise and fall” of civilizations, the following text considers five types of civilization – the agricultural civilization initiated in Mesopotamia, the Abbasid Caliphate, the mercantile civilization typified by the Dutch East India Company, the colonial empire of Britain, and the financial empire of the United States.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Mesopotamia: Key – Abundant Agriculture Resource

Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers) is recognized as the “cradle of civilization.” The Sumerians established a civilization starting around 3500 BC. The fertility of the Tigris-Euphrates valley provided for the creation of a surplus of food and the gathering of people into villages and towns. Division of labor allowed increased competence in jobs; the Sumerians learned to create levees and canals for irrigation. They also created written records – cuneiform on clay tablets. Concentrations of people required organization in the form of government as well as religion to guide the culture. While the resources for food production were good, many other resources were scarce or absent, stimulating a lucrative trade with neighbors, and Mesopotamia became a powerful empire.

Villages expanded into city-states, which then periodically warred with one another, leading to a collapse of many. From his state in the northern area, the leader Sargon capitalized on this opportunity to attack and conquered the southern states. He then united them into the world’s first empire, which he ruled for 50 years until his death. After his death the city-states grew powerful again.

“The Golden Age of Babylon”

Around 1800 BC, Amorites migrated into Mesopotamia and created their own city-states. Babylon, under the rule of Hammurabi, created a union of city-states. He had more enduring success than Sargon: he improved irrigation, the tax system, and housing for governing bodies, and he created a common religion and the reform for which he is renowned, his code of law. This provided a consistent system of justice and covered most of the aspects of daily life and conflict among citizens.

The Collapse of the First Empire

While more conventional causes such as wars and changes in the environment were instrumental in the collapse of empire, scientists have recently postulated that poisoning of the land was a significant factor. The ease of providing irrigation systems lead over time to an accumulated deposition of mineral salts following evaporation of the water, a problem not unknown to current civilizations as in the San Joaquin Valley!

Abbasid Caliphate: Key – Religious Culture and Tolerance

One does not think of the Arabian Peninsula as a land rich in natural resources in the millennium after Christ. Their resource was the Islamic religion. In the seventh century, Arab Muslim armies spread over the entire Middle East and North Africa. They carried their religion with them, not forcing it on conquered populations, but offering social and economic incentives to those who adopted it. The Arabic language spread along with Islam.

The Abbasid Caliphate adopted much from the Mesopotamians as it evolved – Greek, Iranian, Byzantine, Christian, Judaism, Zoroastrian, local elements of the region – in the synthesis of an original entity. This Islamic empire was originally dominated by an Arab elite *that* excluded non-Arabs from an equal share in the benefits of power. However, conversion to Islam did provide increased influence to those who converted.

By the tenth century, a single caliphate had been broken into independent units by struggles over succession and by opposition and separatist movements. The Islamic schism between Sunni and Shi'ite arose during this period. Caliphs became figureheads with little political power.

Despite the fragmentation of monolithic government, a commonwealth evolved in which a single trading system linked the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, allowing free movement of people, goods and ideas.

There are interesting references to a typical power struggle. The founder of the Abbasid Dynasty, a descendant of the Prophet's uncle al-Abbas, was proclaimed Caliph in the mosque at Kufa with the title of "the Shedder of Blood," promising to avenge Shi'ites and Abbasids killed by the preceding regime. While the initial capital was in Kufa, Baghdad became the Islamic imperial capital and emerged as a luxurious center of culture, power, manufacturing, and consumption. However, Islamic power widely spread through the Mediterranean and Europe until the Christian church took over.

Dutch Free Trade and Mercantilism: Key – State as Organizer

Following the decline of Islam in Europe, the growing influence of the Church and the rise of European nation states, the ruling economic idea prior to Adam Smith was mercantilism, in which individual nations are in a zero-sum competition with each other for wealth, gold and silver being synonymous with wealth. A nation has to export more goods and services than it imports, unless it has

precious minerals of its own. The Dutch concept was that of free trade (St. Eustace in the Caribbean was a Dutch owned island with no tariffs) and the idea of dominating the East Indies trade through the Dutch East India Company. The French and the English believed that wealth could be gained only by taking it from others. Their view of mercantilism was to establish colonies in which they could dominate both the supply of cheap resources produced in the colonies and the providing of manufactured goods at high prices in exchange.

State chartered entities were used to further this concept – for example, the Spanish exploitation of the Americas for gold and silver, with both French and British East India companies in competition with the Dutch. The concept was that of building monopolies in competition with other nation states. The British use of tariffs and restriction on North American manufacturing and trade were directly responsible for the Revolution and subsequent creation of the independent United States of America.

The French considered that the Dutch East India Company, a state chartered and supported organization, was the reason for the success of the Dutch, and they attempted to emulate this success by creating the competitive French East India Company. The real strength of the Dutch economy was not only the state sponsored Company but also the entrepreneurial nature and perseverance of the Dutch in which they had far fewer trade restrictions than any of the other mercantilist countries. A succession of Franco-Dutch wars weakened both French and Dutch to the benefit of the English, who were building the Empire on which the sun never sets.

In the end, while mercantilism's goal of increasing state revenue was successful, it ignored the development of the national economy as a whole. The sun has set on the economic policy of mercantilism, but there are still vestiges of the idea; today we call it "industrial policy"!

British Colonialism (The sun never sets!): Adam Smith Economics

The success of the British in establishing a world wide colonial empire/civilization could almost be said to have created a Pax Britannica for the 19th and early 20th centuries. The theories of Adam Smith *in The Wealth of Nations* were a direct contradiction of the zero-sum game of mercantilism. He believed that wealth and trade was "non-zero-sum" game such that two parties involved in transactions could each actually gain because of the exchange of values as viewed by each new owner. One of the consequences of British amassing of national wealth and Adam Smith's theories is perhaps their ability to create the Industrial Revolution, in which a free market provides the forces for entrepreneurial progress.

British colonies, and the mother country hegemony over the colonies, provided the ability to create capital through the idea of buying raw resources cheap and maintaining monopolies in selling manufactured goods dear. Again, the attempt to restrict manufacturing in the Americas contributed to the revolution.

The British Colonial Hegemony created a homogenizing influence in the world. With variations, the English language has become almost a lingua-franca among modern nation states, and many of the business practices initiated in the Empire had spread world wide. However, as in the case of Spanish, French and Dutch wars with one another, the Empire was weakened by WWI, and but for the reluctant but massive intervention of the United States, almost destroyed in WWII. The baton of World Power passed to the United States. New ideas of freedom and liberty led to the independence of almost all of the former colonies and the final decline of the British Empire.

The American Financial-Industrial Empire: Key – Balance of powers, Free Enterprise Capitalism, Individual Liberty

Despite the isolationism and reluctance of the US to get involved in military adventures overseas, they were indeed the armorers of the British in lend-lease programs prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Their industrial might overcame the Axis powers, their isolation from the major destruction of war allowed them the opportunity to forgo the revenge on enemies in the settlements after WWII, and their leadership, wealth and idealism allowed them to create the Marshall Plan, which further helped to ensure that there would be no rise of another Nazi Germany in the near future.

“Our Gallant Russian Allies” turned out to be our committed enemy for the next four decades, stirring up trouble, but also providing a unifying focus on a common enemy through the Cold War. Again, our industrial and economic might allowed us to outspend and out-produce them in almost every aspect of modern life. The lesson not learned from the implosion of the Soviet Union was that a serf nation is apparently incapable of jumping directly from despotism to democracy.

The decade and a half since the end of the Cold war has turned our sight inward, to compete for individual aggrandizement at the expense of the collective. Perhaps we are reverting to the mercantilism of zero sum games, even though we make the claim that “a rising tide lifts all boats.”

1984 TO WORLD FEDERATION – WHAT FUTURES AHEAD?

This article originated in a question – where is the United States now in the flow of history, the rise and fall of empires? So we now examine some possible futures over the next few decades.

There is no definable Empire of the United States, but national power, wealth, and a civil society have allowed us to take on a leadership role in the world. The last century saw growth as a world power, saving the world from fascism and communism. Implosion of the USSR removed a credible opposition threat, and the US became clearly the major military power – invincible in a 20th century type of war. Events leading up to the turn of the century and the suicide attack of 9/11 constitute a turning point of conflict, with which we have shown no great aptitude for coping. Does the last decade include another turning point – a degradation in the constitutional balance of powers coupled with an apathetic electorate and polarization of the less than half of those who do choose to vote? Has a lust for individual and party aggrandizement distorted the American Dream?

If we are indeed at a major turning point, we can expect significant changes in the future, and look at history, at the current situation, at trends pointing through the next few decades. We can create possible scenarios and assess them for probability, desirability, and the possibility of influencing the course to the future.

The Pessimistic Scenario – 1984 a few decades behind schedule. This scenario starts with the lust for power of a group of men who exploit the gullibility of youth with no useful mission or traditional role in modern society. The means used is the distortion of the Islamic religion to support a holy war, a jihad. Their strategy is the building of their own hegemony; their tactics of suicide and terror ignore the Geneva Convention or civilized traditions of previous wars. Attacks are deliberately directed against civilian populations. The response is, necessarily, enhanced constraints of the freedoms previously enjoyed by citizens, but with oversights and accountability slowly eroded in the name of security. US concentration on fighting off the jihad allows other powers to enter and ultimately create the situation described in 1984.

The Conventional Wisdom Scenario. In the last decades of Empire, the British had a reputation for muddling through, derived from centuries of a stable society. The US checks and balances and the influence of the Constitution retain their stabilizing influence, we recognize and repair the polarization which has been growing over the past decade. We create the civil acceptance of the fact that in the new

form of warfare we are all frontline troops, and our casualties will quite likely be far less than annual highway deaths involving alcohol. We find the willingness to prioritize the current social needs in conjunction with the needs to ensure protection and survival, balancing constraints on the populace with the need for security.

The Optimistic Scenario. This is a variation on the previous scenario, which says that other world powers, including the Arab and other Islamic countries recognize their hazards from jihad, and join in denying resources and safe haven to the organizers and perpetrators of terror. In the course of events, jihad becomes obviously a failed thrust and is reduced to the status of a nuisance, in the sense of being criminal activity covered by police powers of civilized countries.

The Wild Card Scenario. This is a variation of the conventional wisdom scenario, in which the many diverse and conflicting business, religious, social and political interests are helped to recognize that we all hang together, or we may be decapitated separately. We figure out how to accept the threat of terror and deal with it. More importantly, over the course of a decade or two, we go back into history and recreate the environment of the founding fathers to effectively establish a modern equivalent of the Constitutional Convention with a major update suitable for carrying not only the US, but perhaps the civilized world, through the 21st century and beyond into a new future. Such an approach clearly involves major changes in culture, what we consider to be acceptable in liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and what constraints might be needed for a civil and harmonious society. A wild card indeed.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

What insights can you offer on the questions raised by the author?

- *Does the current world turmoil have the potential to initiate an accelerating decline of Western Civilization (and with it our American hegemony), or – is this an opportunity to exploit all our advantages to start a new direction, and create the first ever recorded history of an all powerful Western civilization morphing into a first “World Civilization”?*
- *Where is the United States now in the flow of history, the rise and fall of empires?*
- *[paraphrased] Do the events of the last decade – a degradation in the constitutional balance of powers, coupled with an apathetic electorate and polarization of the less than half of those who do choose to vote – constitute a turning point?*
- *[paraphrased] Does the future lead to a global civilization, or does it lead to a return to a modern version of chaos and the dark ages – or is the future cyclical between these two extremes?*

Additional “neuron exercises”:

- *To expand on the author’s first question – will the world be characterized by increasing universalism of Western civilization or by an acceptance of the diversity that can characterize a world civilization? To what extent will Western civilization change in the process?*
- *Are there limits to economic, sociopolitical, and other polarization (haves vs. have-nots)?*
- *Is it true that a rising tide always lifts all boats? If not, then under what circumstances does it do so?*
- *Several factors can impact where the United States is in the flow of history. What will be the impact of the environment (recalling the author’s comments on irrigation systems and the San Joaquin valley)? Of free movement of people, goods, and especially ideas (as facilitated by the Internet)?*
- *The author discusses the way in which Great Britain created capital” through the idea of buying raw resources cheap and maintaining monopolies in selling manufactured goods dear” and that their attempt to restrict manufacturing in the American colonies contributed to the American Revolution. Are there any parallels in contemporary international trade?*
- *The author states that the isolation of the United States from the major destruction of WWII “allowed them the opportunity to forgo the revenge on enemies.” A similar observation applies to the period after WWI, when France and Great Britain insisted on measures toward Germany that were more punitive than those favored by the United States. What are the consequences of not being nearly as isolated from war now, given the advent of terrorism and the possibility of cyber-attacks and*

economic warfare?

- *Among the various civilizations in decline discussed by the author, to what extent was the nature of the external threat (that is, a unitary threat from a peer competitor vs. a more nebulous or multipolar threat) a factor in the decline of each one? Also, to what extent do hegemonies fall because they are envied by other civilizations?*
- *Are there any common underlying reasons for the decline of the civilizations discussed herein?*

Share your thoughts with our readership among other local professional societies and within other WFS chapters worldwide!