

## The Imperative

I was in the Hall of Biodiversity when the thought hit me like a bullet.

It happened during a business trip to New York City in mid-November 2008, when I found myself with some time on my hands and thought a visit to the American Museum of Natural History would be nice. Passing the famous statue of Teddy Roosevelt on horseback outside, I paused in the rotunda to read some of the former president's words, set in stone:

*"The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased; and not impaired in value."*

*"Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike."*

*"A great democracy must be progressive or it will soon cease to be great or a democracy."*



Then this from a president universally lauded as a great conservationist:

*"Conservation means development as much as it does protection."*

I frowned. Wasn't this a contradiction? Perhaps not a century ago, but it certainly seems like one today. But then, human beings are not widely known for the consistency of our ideas or actions, presidents included. In fact, our capacity to hold contradictory thoughts, even to the point of trying to reconcile them, seems to be one of the hallmarks of our evolution. It explains a great deal of our behavior, I thought, as I headed deeper into the museum.

After wandering through huge halls, including one filled with skeletons of mighty woolly mammoths, ferocious fanged mammals, and terrible lizards – all extinct – I drifted into the Hall of Biodiversity about an hour before closing time. I had saved this room for last on purpose, bracing myself for what I anticipated to be a difficult exhibit. I followed a pod of distracted, black-clad teenagers into the space, which was split down its length by a wall. In the interstices between coats, sweaters, and heads bowed over ubiquitous cell phones, I glimpsed images of attractive landscapes and healthy animals – all imperiled, I just knew.

Zooming ahead of the slow-moving teenagers, I completed a U-turn at the end of the wall and entered the other half of the room, anticipating gloomy news. Instead, I was surprised to discover a thoughtful analysis of why biodiversity is in trouble and what is being done to fix the situation. On my right was a rather standard litany of trouble: pollution, overcrowding, habitat destruction, and other human sins. When I twisted my head to the left, however, a hopeful solution resided on the opposite wall. For example, there was an educated discussion about careful stewardship of cattle as an antidote to overgrazing – not something I expected to read in the heart of New York City!

The most informative display, however, awaited me at the end of my short walk. On the right wall was a large map of the world, and above it was an electronic ticker. When I arrived, the ticker read: 5000 BCE (Before Common Era) and the map displayed a handful of lighted red dots, each one representing a million people. They were clustered in the usual places: Egypt, Mesopotamia, China. As I watched, the ticker began to advance... 4500 BCE... 2500 BCE... 500 BCE... 0 CE... 500 CE... and on up to the present day.

You know what happened to the map. New dots appeared, slowly at first, then more quickly, spreading all over the world. Then around 1850, the map exploded. In a blinding blur, red dots swamped nearly all the empty places as the world's population soared exponentially. One billion people by 1800, more than two billion by 1930, six billion by 2000. It was like watching a popcorn machine go totally berserk – but with deep, disturbing implications.

Suddenly, the explosion stopped. After a pause, the ticker reset itself and nearly all the red dots vanished. Just like that the world was sane again. My eyes drifted down to a spot on the wall below the map where I saw these words: “The invention of agriculture has caused the human population to soar from 5 million to 6 billion in just 10,000 years. This growth, along with an increase in resource consumption, underlies the great transformation of the world's ecosystems and today's extinction crisis.”

That's when the bullet struck.



*Plowing with cattle, Egyptian tomb wall circa 1200 BCE*

I spun on my heel and charged into the adjacent Hall of North American Forests. Dodging knots of people, I kept charging, through the Hall of New York State Environment and into the Grand Gallery, a lovely, airy open space. I saw my target ahead: the Hall of Human Origins. I knew exactly where I was going – to the reconstruction of a life-size Neanderthal skeleton I had seen earlier in the afternoon.

I needed to confirm my suspicion.

Like many visitors, judging from the big crowds, I had been drawn to the hominid hall by a variety of curiosities, including the perpetually vexing questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? How did we get here? I found some answers, thanks to a recent renovation to the exhibit, now called the Spitzer Hall of Human Origins. It enabled museum curators to install information from the latest scientific discoveries, including results from new DNA studies on Neanderthals and our specific branch of the hominid tree: *Homo sapiens*.

What I had learned was hair-raising. First, I was reminded that *Homo sapiens* are the only surviving member of the hominid family left on the planet. Just two million years ago there were

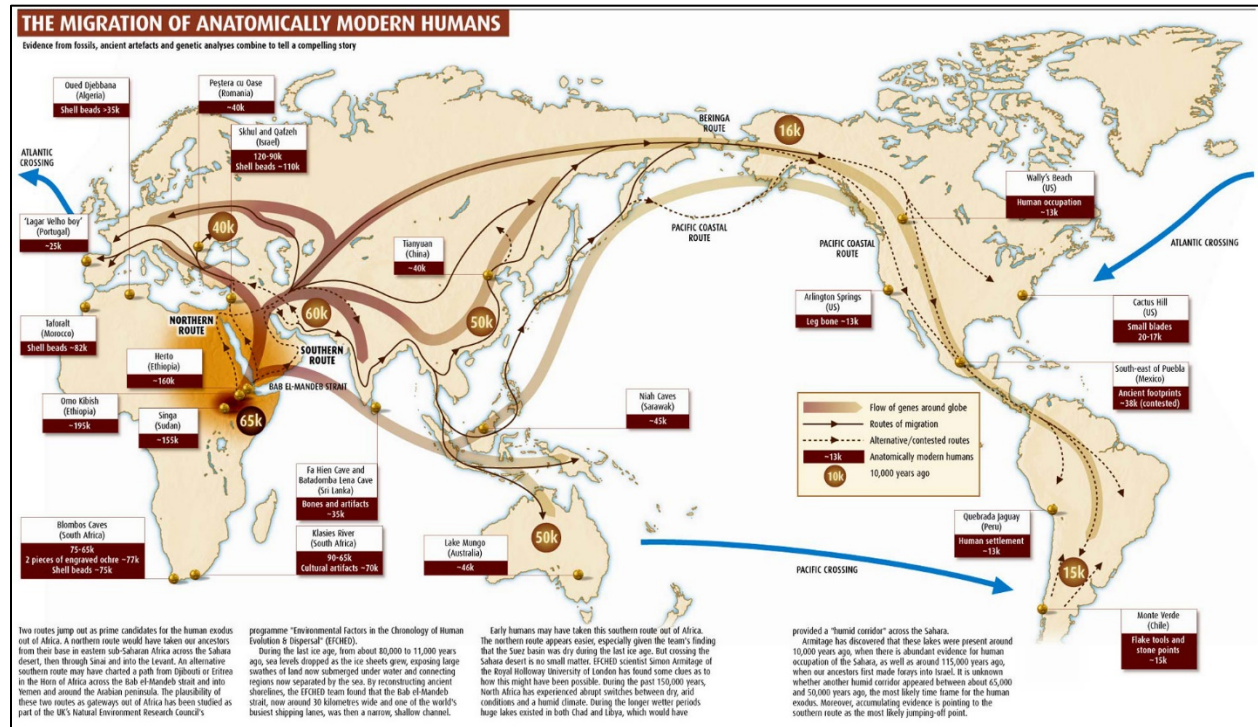


**Neanderthal in Spitzer Hall**

eleven hominid species, including the large *Australopith* group, of ‘Lucy’ fame. This branch went extinct about 1.4 million years ago, just as the *Homo* branch started expanding. Second, I learned that *Homo sapiens* are distinct from the other *Homo* species, including our cousins and contemporaries *Homo neanderthalensis* (we share 3-5% DNA in common). Although both branches descended from a common ancestor called *Homo heidelbergensis*, we had important skills that were underdeveloped in Neanderthals, including better tool-making abilities, an intricate use of language, sophisticated artistic skills, and the cognitive capacity to visualize, and therefore manipulate, the world symbolically (i.e., we were capable of complex, abstract thought). None of this was good news for our cousins.

Third, I learned that as a subspecies we came into existence 250,000 years ago (technically as *Homo sapiens sapiens*), which made us the ‘new kids’ on the block by a long shot. Researchers know the location of our ancestral home: the original hominid stomping-ground of east Africa. They also know we became restless quickly. By 115,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* had expanded into South Africa. Then, starting around 65,000 years ago, we expanded out of Africa, possibly in

two waves, extending first to the Middle East, then into Asia. This was followed by the colonization of what is today Australia approximately 50,000 years ago. Eventually, we colonized North America via the Bering land bridge. As for Europe, the paleontological record indicates that *Homo sapiens* appeared around 40,000 years ago. Called Cro-Magnon by researchers, these ancestors came into contact with our cousins the Neanderthals in a number of different locations – with big consequences.



That's why I headed back to the Neanderthal display – to reread the text. Here's what it said: After 500,000 years of existence, *Homo neanderthalensis* as a distinct line went extinct roughly 10,000 years after contact with Cro-Magnon peoples. Was this a coincidence? Not likely. Although there's some dispute about the exact sequence of events, there is little doubt that we had a hand – possibly a *huge* hand – in the Neanderthal's demise. After all, the same fate befell every other hominid species on Earth. It's not clear whether we killed them outright (with our superior technology and cognitive thinking) or outwitted them over time in competition for food and other resources. Either way, the consequence was the same.

Meet *Homo sapiens*, go extinct.

It wasn't just our fellow humans either – a great variety of animal species died out after contact with our ever resourceful, ever expanding fore-ancestors. In Australia, for example, most

of the marsupials larger than a small dog were hunted to extinction after our arrival. A similar fate awaited the moa, a large flightless bird of New Zealand centuries later. Same with the megafauna of North America (whose skeletons populated the halls of the floors above me), including mammoths, mastodons, and saber-toothed tigers. While a changing climate probably played a role in their fate, indisputably so did hunting by an exotic and aggressive species – us. After millions of years of evolution, the megafauna of North America were extinct within a few thousand years of our arrival. And as I learned back in the Hall of Biodiversity, extinctions continue to this day. In fact, the rate of extinction is rising rapidly, with over 15,000 plant and animal species now at risk of extermination, largely as a consequence of human activity.



**Extinct moa**

As I stood in front of the reconstructed skeleton of my big-browed cousin, thinking about all this, I suddenly felt like apologizing. Although he was a composite of six separate individuals, he had the wholeness of a real person, though mute, chinless and extinct. “Sorry about that,” I wanted to say. “We knew not what we were doing.”

That wasn’t true, of course. We knew exactly what we were doing. What *Homo sapiens* do is domination and by extension extinction – and we do it really well. This was the bullet that struck me in the Hall of Biodiversity: *it’s who we are*. Every exhibit in the museum practically shouted the same message: *we are a dominating species, destined from the start to bend the world to our will whatever the consequences, even if it means extinction*.

It felt like an Imperative or a Prime Directive – an irresistible obligation to rule, command, conquer, and dominate. It was our destiny to become a successful and selfish species aided by an exceptional skill set. Not that things were preordained. I doubt that our ancestors deliberately plotted our cousins’ extirpation – but it happened nonetheless.

It was The Imperative at work.

I departed the museum shortly before closing time and headed outside into the cold, autumnal light of a late afternoon day in Manhattan. After a chilly walk through Central Park, curiosity got the better of me and I headed for the nearest book store. Once inside, I found a book titled *The Seven Daughters of Eve* by Bryan Sykes, a research geneticist at Cambridge University in England. His specialty is mitochondrial DNA, which can be used to trace human genetics back to the origin of the species. I took the book back to my hotel room, where I read this confirmation: The Neanderthals were “completely replaced in Europe, and throughout their range, by the

technologically and artistically superior new species *Homo sapiens*, represented in Europe by Cro-Magnons. What happened in Europe, as far as we can tell from the genetics, also happened throughout the world, with *Homo sapiens* becoming first the dominant then the only human species, completely eliminating earlier forms.” Sykes describes what happened next: “the enslavement of wild animals and plants for food production was the catalyst that enabled *Homo sapiens* to overrun and dominate the earth.”

Whew. I closed the book, worn out from so much education. I decided to turn on the television, though I did so with trepidation. It had been another bad week for American capitalism. The economy was still reeling from the financial atom bomb that detonated on Wall Street in mid-



*The end of Lehman Brothers, 2008*

September. The day after my arrival in New York, the Dow sank 445 points to 7552 – an eleven-and-a-half year low and 52% off the high-water mark, set in October 2007. I located one of the cable channels and settled in for an update. “There is nowhere to run and hide,” said the CEO of an investment firm. “This is one for the ages,” said another talking head, “it has broken all the rules.”

Suddenly, I felt like I was back in the Hall of Biodiversity.

A week or so earlier, Steven Pearlstein wrote in a *Washington Post* commentary: “The past twenty years have provided ample evidence that uncontrolled flows of private capital have created massive booms and busts that have overwhelmed the financial system and destabilized the global economy. The booms have misallocated capital, widened the gulf between rich and poor, and eroded the norms of behavior that had contributed to social and political harmony.”

“There is no denying that American-style capitalism has been undermined by its own success,” he continued. “It rewards manipulation over innovation and speculation over genuine value creation... And now, through the marvels of global financial markets, they have spread their toxic culture and products to economies across the globe.”

That sounded like The Imperative at work. Dominating. All conquering. Unstoppable.

Still, extinction is *not* inevitable. Over the millennia humans created cultural checks to The Imperative, including ethics, morals, norms, laws, and customs. They are cultural sideboards to

our impulses, created to keep The Imperative from running amok – developments that were also in our self-interest. The very idea of progress depends on order; without self-imposed restrictions, anarchy and chaos would rule.

However, these side boards, it seems to me, have weathered badly during the past sixty years – exemplified by the financial crisis currently engulfing the nation. The ethical/moral dike we built over the centuries to hold back a rising sea of industrial greed has sprung so many holes that its collapse seems imminent. It wasn't simply the lack of regulation or oversight on the part of our government that caused all the trouble, as some analysts have suggested, but the near-complete failure of our ethics. The Imperative became unrestrained, with serious consequences, as we are discovering. This time we weren't merely picking on our big-browed Neanderthal cousins – this time we turned The Imperative on ourselves.

I turned off the television, took the elevator down to the lobby, and went for a walk up Broadway Avenue. Feeling cold and blue, I stepped into the warmth and comfort of a small diner. I slipped into a booth and ordered a cup of coffee to warm my desert bones. Above my head, a television glowed. On the screen was our newly-elected president, Barack Obama, speaking soundlessly to a group of people. He radiated optimism. His youthful smile was broad, his face energized with determination, his eyes sparkled with intelligence. His whole demeanor, in fact, shone with a serene self-confidence.

It is an amazing moment in American history. In a few weeks, almost exactly one hundred years to the day after Teddy Roosevelt stepped down as president, Barack Obama, a 47 year-old



***Teddy taking a rest in the AMNH***

African-American community organizer, will become the forty-fourth Executive of this great nation. This was good. I voted for him enthusiastically and I did so for many reasons, not the least of which was his age – only eleven months separates us. We're generational compatriots. But after the day's revelations in the museum, I realized there was another reason to feel optimistic about his election: he

can lead us in a new direction. We can do things differently. We can turn the ship of state. That's our prerogative as well.

Nothing is set in stone, except words.



## The Parade

As we approach the end of the presidency of George W. Bush on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, it is tempting to join the chorus of criticism that is being piled upon our hapless 43<sup>rd</sup> President. The consensus emerging among historians, pundits, and analysts of various stripes seems to be that the best one can say that the Bush presidency is that it was consequential. The harshest assessment is that Bush will be judged by history as one of the worst American presidents ever. Either way, he seems destined to leave a lasting legacy in his wake.

My take on Number 43 is different: as the first President of the *Age of Consequences* (the 21<sup>st</sup> century) Mr. Bush is notable more for what he *did not do* than what he did. Additionally, but no less significantly, his presidency tells us a lot about the role of the Baby Boomers in our modern predicament. But let's begin with a recap of our current president's accomplishments.

What Bush did principally was start two bottomless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with all their collateral damage, including over 4000 dead American soldiers, 30,000 wounded, and a \$3 trillion hole punched through the nation's financial spreadsheet. Whether these wars will be judged to have been worth their high cost – i.e., whether they are ultimately 'winnable' or produce democratic governments in two nations notorious for their repression and political instability – only time will tell. Recall that the original justification for the invasion of Iraq – Saddam Hussein's purported stockpile of 'weapons of mass destruction' – was quickly exposed to be erroneous, casting doubt on President Bush's integrity and legacy.

What *is* clear, however, at least to this observer, is that the means by which the president and his administration took us to war in Iraq – the falsehoods, the ineptitude, the brazen flaunting of world opinion, the snubbing of allies, the utter disregard for bipartisanship, and an outrageous arrogance in general – is an indelible black mark on his record. Then there were the suspensions of civil liberties, the "extreme rendition" of suspected Al-Qaida members, and the torture of prisoners that followed the invasion. Terrorist threat or no terrorist threat, this wasn't how a United States government was supposed to behave.



**President George W. Bush**



Bush didn't seem to care what other people thought. During the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as the world reverberated with the sounds of anti-war demonstrations, I remember thinking: can a government call itself democratic if it is completely insensitive to the voices of the people? Not a single protest or voice of dissent mattered. The Bush administration turned a deaf ear to the public and plowed ahead with its agenda. Well, an answer to my question began to take shape in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005 as an inadequate government response angered the nation. Bush's poll numbers took a dive and never recovered. His fall translated into major gains for the Democratic Party in the 2006 mid-term elections, and ultimately its triumph in the 2008 general election in which Bush and his party were soundly repudiated. Apparently, in a republic the voices of the people still matter.

Then there was the economy.

Though much has been made of Bush's strong leadership following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I believe history will judge his poor handling of the economy as more consequential in the long run. As the economic aftershocks of the meltdown on Wall Street in the fall of 2008 continue to spread across the nation, it is clear that Bush and Co. have no one to blame but themselves and their laissez-faire/free market ideology for the devastation wrecking everything from Wall Street to Main Street.

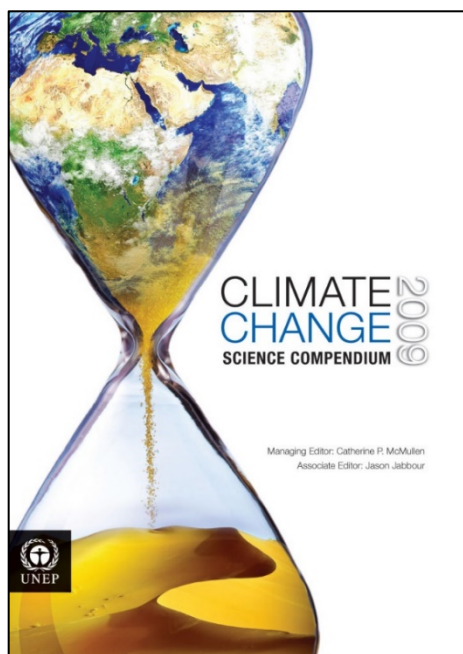
In an article titled, "*The \$10 Trillion Hangover*" in *Harper's Magazine*, economists Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz write: "In the eight years since George W. Bush took office, nearly every component of the U.S. economy has deteriorated." They calculate the bill for Bush-era spending to be \$10 trillion, a mammoth and unprecedented number. When Bush took office, he inherited a budget surplus of \$128 billion. What happened next, according to Bilmes and Stiglitz, was this: the administration pushed through two massive, inequitable tax cuts and increased government spending by 59%, surging the deficit to a projected \$1.2 trillion by the end of 2008, with more red ink on the way.

"Whether we struggle to break our addiction to deficit spending in order to pay off our debts, or wind up inflating them away," they write, "the economic mistakes of the George W. Bush White House will cast a long shadow over the next generation of Americans."

Which brings me to what President Bush *did not* accomplish in eight years: no reform of Business-as-Usual on any of a variety of big challenges. Take climate change. During Bush's presidency, the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a global

assembly of climatologists and other scientists, issued two major updates on global warming, one in 2001 and another in 2007. The conclusions of both reports were nearly unequivocal: (1) climate change is largely human-caused; and (2) the situation is unprecedented in recent Earth history, requiring that governments take action to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions or risk the future of life on the planet.

The Bush administration did nothing in response to these reports. At first, they dismissed the science, saying it was ‘vague’ and ‘contradictory.’ Then, when the consensus grew too large to ignore Bush and Co. tacked into the headwind with a new message: action on climate would



***We were warned***

damage the economy. The result was the same: the President sat on his hands over a crucial eight-year period, during which concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub>, a significant greenhouse gas, rose from 345 to 385 parts-per-million (ppm). Most scientists agree that if CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations reach 450 ppm it will cause irreversible damage to the earth’s life-support systems – and many think we’re already in the danger zone. Either way, I suspect we’ll come to regret Bush’s inaction in the not-so-distant future.

But we can’t just blame George W. Bush for our current troubles. His predecessor, William J. Clinton, didn’t accomplish very much either along these lines during his eight years as president. In fact, I don’t see a great deal of difference between the two men, despite their obvious political and ideological disagreements.

Tellingly, during the Clinton years, our corporate industrial economy went global. Free trade was liberalized internationally, planetary health continued its deterioration, and greenhouse gas emissions maintained their steady rise. True, Clinton didn’t embroil us in endless wars or alienate global public opinion with our foreign policy. And true, he managed to create a federal budget surplus by the time he left office in 2001 – a noteworthy accomplishment. He also presided over a strong economy, though cheap energy prices had as much to do with this as anything else. So, one could argue that in comparison, Clinton was a “better” president than Mr. Bush and will enjoy a happier judgment by historians.

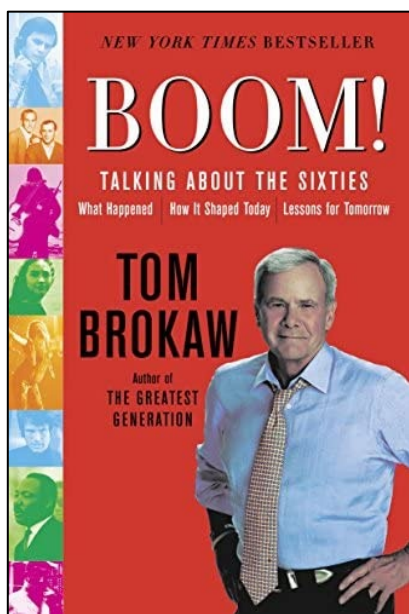
Perhaps – but there is another factor at work that will affect both of their legacies.



flourishing of women’s liberation and environmental movements; the questioning of materialism; the opening of frontiers in art and technology; and a ton of great music.

In my opinion, these admirable successes happened for a reason: they were the product of a specific set of ‘front-ender’ qualities, exemplified by Bush and Clinton, including supreme self-confidence, unstoppable drive, a penchant for confrontation, situational ethics (more pronounced

in Clinton’s case), and a desire to fundamentally remake the world. Here’s one example: in his chronicle of the era titled *Boom!: Talking about the Sixties: What Happened, How It Shaped Today, Lessons for Tomorrow*, journalist Tom Brokaw tells the story of Dr. Judith Rodin, who became the first female president of an Ivy-League school – her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania.



Rodin entered Penn as an undergraduate in 1962 and described her first two years as essentially an extension of the 1950s. “Students were very concerned about their own lives, social events, and classroom performance,” she told Brokaw, “they were neither politically nor socially active.” Then came Kennedy’s assassination, the Civil Rights Act, and the expansion of the Vietnam War – and everything changed.

Rodin soon became president of a campus group called Women’s Student Government; she organized voter registration drives in the South during spring break and she participated in anti-war protests on campus. Upon graduation, she went to Columbia to pursue a PhD in psychology, discovering that some of the older faculty members refused to work with female doctoral candidates because they weren’t “serious” about their careers! Then she lost a year’s worth of research when a student uprising in 1968 closed the campus and culminated in a violent confrontation with New York City police. The loss of her data made her more focused than ever. “It made me tough in a positive way,” she recalled, “it made me very, very determined.”

She joined the faculty at Yale, and in 1992 became the university’s Provost. She was, by her own calculation, driven. Her marriage came apart. “I used to think you could have it all,” she said. “Now I believe you can have it all, but not all at the same time. There are costs to every decision. Mine weren’t cost-free. I had only one child and two divorces. That’s a cost.” At a party to celebrate her departure from Yale to become the next president of Penn, she noticed how the young women in the room evaluated her success. “A lot of the women looked at how I led my life

and decided they didn't want to live at that level of drive and anxiety, with no free time, forgetting to breathe!" she told Brokaw.

Still, she had no regrets. "When Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for reelection in 1968," she said, "we felt we had changed the world. Whether it was true or not...it was an extraordinarily heady experience for my generation, and it influenced us for a long time."

Some chose a different path. Filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan (*The Big Chill*) told Brokaw that at some point many of his fellow Boomers gave up their idealism and succumbed to the impulses of getting rather than giving. "I want the house, I want the car, I want the school," Kasdan said. "No matter how strong your beliefs are, you'll be under constant pressure. It's like trying to hold back the ocean."

When Tom Brokaw reminded Bill Clinton that many of the young people who disdained material goods and wealth in the 1960s were now among the wealthiest people in the world, Clinton replied, "It was always an energetic generation." The real test, the former president said, will be how the generation responds to its wealth. For her part, Hillary Clinton, who gave the valedictory address at Wellesley in 1969, summed up the message of the 1960s to Brokaw this way: "Choose your own life, make your own decisions. I think it was great for America."



***Boomers had it good***

At the end of his book, Brokaw – who is not a Boomer – summed up the generation affectionately this way: they were rude, selfish, self-centered, idealistic, and revolutionary. "But it's a different world today," he continued. "We need to be mindful that this is a smaller planet with many more people than forty years ago, and that the future will depend a great deal more on cooperation, large and small, than confrontation."

Which brings me to the 'back-enders' – those born between 1955 and 1964. I believe they developed a very different set of personality traits, and they did so partly as a reaction to front-ender behavior. These traits include: a desire for reconciliation, a need to find pragmatic solutions to problems, a tempered idealism (verging on cynicism), and a faith in cooperation. These are qualities, not coincidentally, represented by President-elect Barack Obama, who was born in 1961.

It's not just my opinion. In a story published ten days before the inauguration titled "Obama Ushers in a New Cultural Era," reporter Jocelyn Noveck of the Associated Press, notes that the departure of George W. Bush will mark the passing of an entire generation shaped by the bitter divisions caused by the Vietnam War, civil rights, sexual freedoms and much more. "Those experiences, the theory goes, led Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, to become deeply motivated by ideology and mired in decades-old conflicts," she writes. And Obama? "He's an example of a new pragmatism: Idealistic but realistic, post-partisan, unthreatened by dissent, eager and able to come up with new ways to solve problems."



Obama himself has commented on this difference. Writing about the political clashes between front-enders Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives during the mid-1990s, in his autobiography *Audacity of Hope*, Obama said, "I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the baby boom generation – a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of campuses long ago – played out on the national stage."

He went on to say:

*It's precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy and the sheer predictability of our current political debate, that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It's what keeps us locked in "either/or" thinking....*

*They are out there, I think to myself, those ordinary citizens who have grown up in the midst of all the political and cultural battles, but who have found a way – in their own lives, at least – to make peace with their neighbors, and themselves.*

*I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point.*

As a back-ender myself, these words resonate strongly, especially with my experience in the 'grazing wars' of the mid-1990s in the American Southwest. In the acrimonious struggle between environmentalists and ranchers over livestock grazing on public lands, I saw a pattern: much of the conflict on both sides was being driven by leaders a half-generation older than myself.

They were activists who had come-of-age during a time when a take-no-prisoners attitude was the norm. On the environmental side, this attitude meant leaders found themselves in unending conflict with rural people. Where I live, in northern New Mexico, environmental activists tangled frequently with low-income, traditional Hispanic communities, especially over logging in national forests. Not surprisingly (to me), two of these environmentalists were hung in effigy by angry village residents. A bomb was even placed inside the mail box of a prominent, and highly litigious, environmental group in Santa Fe. Fortunately, it didn't go off. It wasn't any better on the ranching side. A pro-extractive, anti-government group called "People for the West!" was just as aggressive, stubborn, and arrogant.

I don't tell this story in order to assume an air of moral superiority for back-enders. Rather, it illustrates how we came to this moment in time. Front-enders, such as Clinton and Bush, had an important role, pro and con, in creating the challenges we all face today. Back-enders will have a big role to play as well, but in a significantly different way. That's because we will eventually assume the reins of power and influence and hold them well into the *Age of Consequences*. One, Barack Obama, will assume power very shortly. And the dynamic tension between these two half-generations will continue to shape a great deal of current history.

Our current predicament has many sources and is not simply the inevitable result of a human imperative to dominate the planet, abetted by technology and fueled by cheap oil. It is also the product of specific historical forces, including the mighty impact of the Baby Boom generation. Front-enders, such as George W. Bush, will leave a lasting legacy that has as much to do with his age as it does with his politics. The same will probably be said of Barack Obama. Together, they create important bookends to a momentous period of rapid change in American history.



## A New York Interlude

There's something about New York City that inspires the credulous.

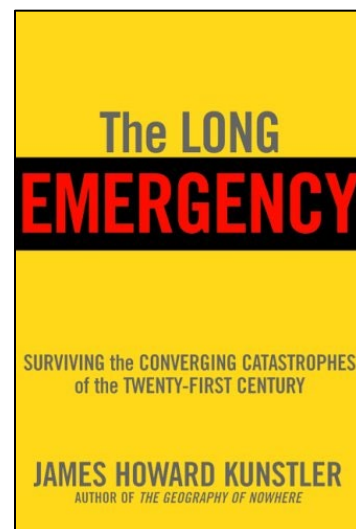
At least, that's what it does to me. The first time it happened was in the spring of 2006, during an exploratory business trip to the Big Apple. Rummaging in an airport bookstore for something to read on the outward leg of my journey, I came across James Kunstler's bestselling cautionary tale about Peak Oil titled *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century*. Curious and alarmed, I plucked the book from the rack and flipped it over to survey the promotional blurbs, reading how the author "graphically depicts the horrific punishments that lie ahead for Americans for more than a century of sinful consumption and sprawling communities, fueled by the profligate use of cheap oil and gas." Yikes! Then I thought, "Oh come on, how bad could things be?"

I handed the clerk fifteen dollars to find out.

Initially skeptical, within a few pages I was hooked. Part of it was the subject matter, which I knew something about, but a lot of it was Kunstler's cheeky writing style which engagingly mixed fact and speculation into a sardonic and irresistible stew of millennialism. As a conservationist, I was aware of various environmental calamities on the horizon, but Kunstler's book opened my eyes to the civilization-changing nature of the predicted upcoming oil depletion, as well as the interconnections of all our unsustainable activities, each grounded in our economy's messianic belief in unlimited growth on a finite planet. It all flowed into what he called the *Long Emergency*, a sort of neo-collapse stage of civilization, replete with coffee shortages, oil hoarding, charismatic dictators, and a reduction to a pre-Model T standard of living. True or not, I couldn't put the book down. I read it avidly on the long flight; I read it as soon as I arrived at my hotel; and I read it between meetings. Eventually, I retreated to my room and kept reading until I reached the end, which required a marathon session in an overstuffed hotel chair.

Dazed and stiff, I decided to go for a long walk to digest all the bad news.

I started on the upper West side, where the hotel was located, and crossed quickly to Central Park. It was a beautiful spring day, with blue skies and blooming trees everywhere – a perfect counterpoint to the gloomy vision of the *Long Emergency*. And yet, oddly, the blue skies and green





trees reinforced the specter of societal collapse instead of challenging it. Strolling through Strawberry Fields, I imagined food riots among the foliage. I envisioned angry mobs gathering amidst the statuary literati of the park's south side, and overturned taxis at 57<sup>th</sup> and Park Avenue, as I crossed the intersection. Macabre images but also plausible, thanks to Mr. Kunstler.



Something like eight million people live in New York City – what would they do if the “elevators stopped working,” as he put it, when electricity became scarce? How would eight million people be fed if trucks stopped coming or ships no longer sailed into port because oil production had entered its terminal decline? The mean streets of Manhattan – the ones that my feet were bruising at that very moment – topped out only feet above sea level. What would New Yorkers do when the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets melted away, raising the sea globally by 200 feet? What if the rains stopped falling on the city’s watershed upstate, drying up the aqueducts that quenched millions?

As the bright trees of Central Park gave way to the brick canyons of mid-Manhattan, these scenarios drifted from plausible to inevitable in my mind. In fact, the *Long Emergency*, I told myself, had already begun. The city’s ceaseless traffic, as remorseless and irresistible as a gale, suddenly seemed fragile and impermanent; the hustling crowds looked tense and unsmiling not from the pressures of big city life, but from fear and desperation. The little food markets looked like shining jewels set in a drab urban mantle; the neon advertisements that competed everywhere for my attention with promises of beauty, harmony, and ever-lasting satisfaction began to look like false gods tempting us into sin and sloth at precisely the wrong moment in history.

Feet and mind aching, I decided to conclude my ramble at the site of the former World Trade Center. It seemed like a fitting metaphor for Kunstler’s doom-and-gloom prognostications. After all, didn’t another World-as-we-knew-it end on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, never to return? The site also served as a sober memorial of man’s inhumanity to man. We are, unfortunately, a species

capable of incredible madness and cruelty, not only evidenced by the gaping hole I saw before me but also in the knowledge of what lay in store for us if even half of what Kunstler predicted came true. If the world changed on 9/11, as I believe it did, then the chain reaction it represented was still evolving rapidly nearly five years later, though not in the direction that most Americans and their leaders supposed. We had set our shoulder against terrorism while ignoring far greater perils. We had also overlooked our role in bringing on these perils. We had met the enemy, as Pogo once observed, and it was us.

Clearly, Kunstler and New York City had messed with my mind.

During a return visit for business in November 2008, New York provoked my incredulity again. This time, however, it involved not despair, but hope.

Two recent events had set the stage. The first was the ongoing meltdown of Wall Street. Not only did this event commence a historic economic and employment crisis in our country, it exposed our financial system's Great Swindle for all to see and be outraged by. This generated the hopeful news that Wall Street's egregious behavior had created momentum for *real reform* of our financial system, finally. According to a wide variety of pundits, political leaders, and even bankers at the time, everything was going to be different now. American capitalism, we were told, had learned a sobering and corrective lesson and would change its ways – or have them changed by Congress. Inaction wasn't an option. Unregulated greed, lies and shady dealings would soon feel the sting of governmental oversight (as it had not in the past eight years), just as it was now feeling the wrath of public outrage. Cries and promises of 'never again' would be redeemed.

I believed it.

In my hotel room, I eagerly surveyed all the news channels, clicking rapidly through the promises, the denunciations, the shock, and the up-to-minute reports about the still gyrating stock market. Dramatic stories about government bailouts, institutions "too big to fail," cratered pension funds, wipeouts of retirement plans, foreclosed homes, broken dreams, frustration and fear dominated the news. I was mesmerized, appalled, and giddy all at the same time. Especially encouraging were the earnest calls for reform across the social and political spectrum. Many people in this nation understand that the Status Quo isn't working well, especially for the besieged middle class, and that an overhaul of our educational, financial, and free-spending governmental ways is now necessary. A megacrisis like the Great Swindle was an important opportunity, everyone said, to implement big changes.

I hoped so. Things certainly *felt* optimistic as I walked through the belly of the Wall Street Beast to my meetings at various foundation offices. Although the people I encountered ebbing and flowing through the canyons of mid-Manhattan seemed to be as self-focused and impatient as ever, I thought the buildings looked embarrassed and contrite. They had an eyes-cast-down appearance, I thought, the tallest ones especially. For a lunch with an old colleague, I walked right into the epicenter of the Great Swindle itself. Entering the former headquarters of investment giant Lehman Brothers, whose collapse triggered the ensuing crisis, I could almost see the shockwaves emanating from the marble walls, radiating out like seismic lines on a map of America. I swore the buildings in this part of town leaned a little closer together, huddled in contrition, trying to apologize for the poor behavior of their occupants. A cold wind blew through the canyons now, adding to the dirge-like atmosphere of the moment – a moment, despite the chill, when I thought things really *could* be different.

The second hopeful event was the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. “Hope” and “change” had been the watchwords of his candidacy, and like millions of Americans who voted for him I believed earnestly that he meant them. It wasn’t just his words, however, that electrified our expectations. Not only had the nation elected its first African-American president, it had tapped a serious, youthful, and obviously intelligent person to lead the nation, hopefully out of recession, debt, war, humiliation, and a host of other serious challenges. There was little doubt in my mind that Obama would implement his promises of change, especially since his party enjoyed large majorities in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. In the chilly wind, it felt like Christmas had come early – which present for America would the Democrats open first? Wall Street reform? Health care? Climate change? Immigration? That they would all be opened, sooner or later, was beyond doubt. I couldn’t wait. I crossed my fingers.



In 2011, I returned to New York City after another two-and-a-half year interval, again for business. My fingers were uncrossed. This time my credulity involved neither hope nor despair. Instead, I was taken in by the illusion of normalcy.

Five years after reading Kunstler's breathless opus, the Peak Oil crisis had not materialized. True, a barrel of crude oil was trading over \$100 – which had been unthinkable to industry analysts back in 2006 – and true, the British Petroleum oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico last summer had highlighted the dangerous extremes to which our addiction to oil had driven corporations and governments to act. But the much-promised, chaos-inducing terminal decline of global oil production had not occurred. The recession was an important factor, since it had caused global oil demand to drop. At the same time, high prices (and profits) had spurred new exploration as well as the development of new technology, including an insidious one called 'fracking,' all of which led to a rise in oil and natural gas production, delaying 'Peak Oil' and leaving critics like James Kunstler tapping their toes impatiently.

However, if the dire predictions of peak oilers haven't come true yet, it's a different story with climate change. In fact, the news from climate scientists has grown worse. Things are happening more quickly, and at accelerating rates than even the worst-case scenarios predicted way back in 2007 when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its 4<sup>th</sup> cyclical Report, warning of Big Trouble ahead. New and refined methods of observation, mountains of data, and a deeper understanding of the Earth's paleoclimate record all pointed scientists toward the same conclusion: the climate situation is rapidly slipping beyond our control. We must do something soon to curb greenhouse gas emissions, scientists began to warn more vociferously, or face tragic consequences. The worrisome prognostications created a groundswell of media reports, meetings, conferences, and gatherings around the globe, culminating in a critical United Nations Summit at Copenhagen in December 2009.

The time for action, it seemed, was at hand.

In the end, nothing happened. The news cycle moved on, as did public interest. New leaders in Congress, elected last fall in a predictable and reactionary push-back against President Obama and the Democrats, took a hostile position on climate change. The possibility of meaningful action faded quickly, just as the science became more and more clear that inaction equaled tragedy. Meanwhile, the early effects of climate change are already being felt around the planet in the form of severe droughts, floods, and storms – just as the scientists predicted. Worse, the chaotic weather

has strained the ability of food-producing nations, including the U.S., to keep up with the increasingly important job of feeding seven billion people. Prices for staples such as wheat, corn, soy, and rice have skyrocketed in recent months, and show no sign of relaxing anytime soon. The news cycle may have moved on, but if you live in Bangladesh, Somalia, Tunisia, or the Maldives, the crisis has not.

Wall Street certainly moved on. That's because the promised reform of the nation's financial markets never happened. Oh, in 2010 Congress managed, after much bickering between the two parties, to pass a tepid set of adjustments to the banking system but few observers believe they will correct in any meaningful way the flaws of Business-as-Usual. Instead, the big banks got bailed out by the U.S. Treasury with a slap-on-the-wrist from Congress and a bit of finger-pointing from President Obama. In other words, Wall Street got away with murder. Official investigations never dug deep, no one responsible went to jail, real reform never happened, and as a result American capitalism quickly returned to Business-as-Usual. But hey, the stock market bounced back! Profits are up. All is well, right?

The promise of Obama's leadership never happened either, I'm sad to say. Change and hope went begging. He did sign a law that substantially overhauled the nation's health care system, but after that Obama punted on nearly everything else. He picked a group of Wall Street insiders to run the Treasury Department and to advise him, thus sending a clear signal that his promise of "change" didn't apply to our financial system. He punted entirely on climate legislation, even as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill tossed an important opportunity into his lap. Worse, his administration has recently opened new fields for oil-and-gas and coal exploration across the nation's public lands, with more promised. He also expanded the war in Afghanistan, and refused to close the detention facility in Guantanamo, contrary to campaign promises. Almost two-and-a-half years into his presidency, it looks like Business-as-Usual still rules in Washington, D.C. Issued an invitation to the White House, Change never made it past the reception room. At least it did better than Hope, which got left on a street corner.

Visiting New York this time and thinking of Obama, I was struck by the fierce *non-urgency* of now. Everywhere I went, everything looked perfectly normal. Tides of people pooled and flowed across intersections as usual; taxi cabs honked as urgently and noisily as ever; elevators worked perfectly; food and drink could be had at nearly every street corner; the neon advertisements continued to shout their utopian messages with deafening effect; tourists swarmed

the theaters and toy stores in Times Square; and the trees in Central Park were as green and leafy as ever. The great industrial lungs of the city – steaming, sooty, and restless – breathed in-and-out at their usual relentless rate, oblivious or indifferent to any wider worry. Rain fell as it normally did, clouds scudded among the tops of the buildings, and the subways rumbled on. Walking endlessly as always, I easily believed that All Was Normal. Everything is fine. Despair, hope – what were those? Just words, echoes bouncing around the brick-and-steel walls of New York’s canyons. Words fade, streets endure.

For a few days, I believed it.



Photos by Courtney White.

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