Slouching Towards Utopia?:
An Economic History of the Long Twentieth Century, 1870-2016

XXIV. Civilization-Scale Threats

J. Bradford DeLong
U.C. Berkeley Economics and Blum Center, NBER, WCEG
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24.1. Closing the Door to a Truly Human Civilization?

The possibility of someday having a civilized, potentially truly-human world—one in which fear of life-crippling or -killing hunger is all but banished, in which nearly everyone is literate and has leisure, some degree of comfort, and voice with respect to collective decisions that shape their life—opened up around 1870, with globalization and with the upward leap in technological progress from the Second Industrial Revolution: the industrial research lab and the modern corporation, plus the technologies they could invent and deploy from modern steelmaking to petroleum power to aircraft and, eventually, advanced materials and computers. But the door could have been closed, and could still close.

The door could have closed with a whimper: had global technological progress slowed back to its 1800-1870 pace, it is not clear that technology would win the war with Malthusian pressures; had global technology slowed back to below its 1800-1870 pace, it is clear technology would have, once again, lost.

The door could have closed with a bang: a global nuclear war sometime between 1945 and today might—it is not certain that it would have, but it might have—closed the door.

And the door could be closed in the future. The danger of nuclear war remains. And the danger that civilization might be derailed by a global warming-induced climate crisis is noticeably higher now than it was back 30 years ago, when the dangers of global warming came on the radar screen, and wise activists and

scientists began their so far-fruitless attempt to convince a critical mass of politicians to do something about it.

24.2. Nuclear War

24.2.1. Avoiding the Danger of Nuclear War in the Past

24.2.1.1. Developing the Conventional-Nuclear Line

The civilization-scale threat everyone feared after 1945 was the threat of nuclear war.

Had the A-bomb been developed a year earlier—or had Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan been able to hold out for a year later—it is quite clear what would have happened. The alliance that was the United Nations would have dropped bombs on Germany and Japan as fast as they could be built at Los Alamos and Oak Ridge. They might have been dropped on cities to terrorize Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan into surrender—as was, indeed, the purpose of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They might have been dropped to kill enemy leaders: a dead Hitler would in all probability have been followed by a German army coup and the a surrender. They might have been dropped on front lines in the hope of creating a radioactivity-poisoned channel for a breakthrough. But they would have been dropped.

Had not two but a number of bombs been dropped, it would have been more difficult to draw a line between conventional and nuclear weapons that generals would fear to cross. And even as thing were, not all generals feared to cross that line. British Field Marshall Bernard Law Montgomery appeared to have taken the lesson from 1950s NATO war-game exercises to be that nuclear weapons had a definite breakthrough-enabling role on a modern battlefield. And had American General Douglas MacArthur possessed release authority when Peng Dehuai's People's Liberation Army caught the United Nations army MacArthur commanded on the wrong foot near the Yalu River in Korea, it is more likely than not that MacArthur would have tried to destroy the cities and factories of Manchuria.

But, luckily, the nuclear line was not crossed in any of the wars since World War II. The United States remains the only country that has used nuclear weapons in war—and against civilian targets, at that.

Why was it not crossed? I think that we were lucky.

24.2.1.2. Superpower Restraint

One interpretation of why we were lucky is thus: During the High Cold War both sides thought that they were playing for the future of humanity. Believing Communists thought that history was on their side—but only if the global bourgeoisie could be prevented from destroying the homelands of socialism with fire and sword, and killing the activists and agitators who could teach the proletarians their destiny. Believing westerners saw Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism-Maoism as a totalitarian ideology that could only survive by destroying the fortresses of freedom. For both sides, risks of nuclear annihilation would be worth running if and only if it were only thus that the adversary's superior military power could be frozen in place. And it never reached the point where either Cold War superpower had quite that degree of fear of the other.

Now, after the end of the High Cold War, we are no longer playing for the future of humanity. Gains are not proportional to even a small risk of nuclear destruction. Is it worth running the risk of nuclear destruction on order to change the language of the mayor of Strasbourg? What is at stake in the Balkans that is worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier? When people squabble over a lunch check, nobody pulls out a bomb and says: "Give in! Or this thing might go off!" Thus nuclear weapons' use does not have a place. And yet the existence of nuclear weapons means that using conventional weapons to pose an existential threat to any great power regime has no place either.

24.2.1.3. But Superpower Restraint a Near-Run Thing

In the early 1980s the U.S. NSA--or perhaps it was the Defense Department--loved to play games with Russian air defense. They would send probe planes in from the Pacific to fly over Siberia. And they would watch and listen: Where were the gaps in Russian sensor coverage? How far could U.S. planes penetrate before being spotted? What were Russian command-and-control procedures to intercept intruders? And so on, and so forth.

Then, one night, September 1, 1983, the pilot of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 to Seoul mispunched his destination coordinates into his autopilot, and sent his plane west of its proper course, over Siberia, where Russian fighters—confident that they had finally caught one of the American spyplane intruders napping—blew it and its hundreds of civilian passengers out of the sky.

With some glee the Reagan administration claimed that the Russians had deliberately shot down a civilian airlinerI because they were barbarians and terrorists, and wanted the world to know that they were barbarians and terrorists by handing the Reagan administration a propaganda victory. The Russians counterclaimed that the CIA had deliberately misprogrammed the autopilot of KAL 007 and monkeyed with its transponder, in order to trick the Russians into shooting down a civilian airliner. What had actually happened was a mistake: radar operators, majors, colonels, and generals seeing what they expected to see—a U.S. spyplane intruding into Russian air space and, for once, not being alert enough to scoot out to sea before the defending fighters arrived.

In the late 1980s, the U.S. sent its warships into the Persian Gulf to protect Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers against Iranian attack. Saudi and Kuwaiti oil earned dollars that paid for Saddam Hussein's Iraq to fight its bloody war against Khomeini's Iran in what the Carter and Reagan administrations had been not very upset at, and perhaps encouraged, as payback for the outrage against international law and diplomatic practice committed by Khomeini and company's seizure of hostages from the diplomats at the American embassy in Tehran.

This time it was the turn of the Americans—the sailors on the "robo-cruiser" Vincennes—to shoot down a fully-loaded civilian airliner, Iran Air Flight 655 on its regularly-scheduled run in its regularly-scheduled flight path at its regularly-scheduled time across the Persian Gulf from Bandar Abbas to Dubai. Once again what happened was a mistake: sailors seeing an airliner flying straight and level as a hostile bomber dropping in altitude and preparing to fire its missiles. The records of the Vincennes' instruments show no signals that would suggest a bomber was detected, while they do record detecting a civilian IFF signal.

Boys who don't think too fast and aren't too smart at processing information playing with deadly toys. Testosterone-poisoned devil-apes using not rocks and fists to demonstrate some bizarre concept of reproductive fitness but using buttons and missiles instead. And, increasingly, testosterone-crazed devil apes playing with nuclear weapons.

Use of nuclear weapons would be irrational. But the Vincennes's shoot-down of Iran Air 655 was irrational. And the Red Air Force's shoot-down of Korean Airlines 007 was irrational. Yet both of these happened.

As Soviet General Secretary Nikita Sergeyevich Khruschchev wrote to American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy during the 1963 Cuban Missile Crisis:

> We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose…

Continue our current nuclear weapons command-and-control systems, and sooner-or-later bad luck and the law of averages will lead some computer to send faulty signals or some observer to misread what is going on, and then launch.

24.2.1.4. Non-Great Powers

And what about non-great powers? Did they have reason to acquire, threaten to use, and then potentially use nuclear weapons? What kept them from doing so?

A country's decision-making processes can become deranged. We see, back in history, decision-making processes becoming deranged enough carry countries over the brink and into pointless war—as Israel's did in 1956, Egypt's did in 1967, Pakistan's did in 1970, Iraq's did in 1979 and again in 1991, Argentina's and Israel's did in 1982, and others have more recently. If so, then the situation is much more dangerous, and much more likely to end in genocide or near-genocide, if you have nuclear weapons than if you do not. You might use them, and then others might respond. Or others might fear that you will use them, and preempt.

Moreover, the possession of nuclear weapons turns your country into a hostage. A non-great power country with nuclear weapons is hostage to, and needs to fear its own majors and colonels with their fingers on the button. And once a country acquires nuclear weapons, its neighbors will too. Then it is hostage not just to its own internal decision-making processes and majors and colonels, but to their internal decision-making processes, and their majors and colonels as well.

Thus a sensible non-great power would quickly find that, unless it finds itself under some existential threat that might be deterred by nuclear weapons, having them is more trouble than it is worth.

24.2.2. Managing the Risks of Nuclear War in the Future

24.2.2.1. Growing Risks

But as we have moved into the post-Cold War age, the risks that non-great power régimes—and their leaders—will come under existential threat from a great power are going up. George W. Bush and Richard Cheney hanged Saddam Hussein of Iraq. They had declared in 2002 that there was an "axis of evil" consisting of three countries: Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Iran, with 80 million people, might calculate that that talk was simply bluster: that it is too large and its terrain too mountainous to be taken down by America's peacetime army, and that no sane U.S. president would ever wish to incur the political costs of mobilization in order to engage in a pure War of Choice. Perhaps the Iranian régime is heartened by the fact that George W. Bush ended his presidency angry and disgusted with those of his advisors who had pushed him into a quagmire in Iraq. Perhaps the Iranian régime is very anxious: who can tell whether U.S. presidents will be reliably sane?

It is very clear that the North Korean tyranny believes that it needs nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons do provide an element of deterrence. A country with nuclear weapons is unlikely to suffer an all-out attack by a neighbor aimed at conquering it and overthrowing and hanging its government. A country with nuclear weapons is unlikely to suffer a surgical attack by a great power—an attack either endorsed or not endorsed by the Security Council—that has lost its patience and seeks cheap and easy "regime change." A country with nuclear weapons will find that its soldiers, diplomats, heads of state, and heads of government will be treated with extra respect. These are all advantages to the regime of possessing nuclear weapons.

All these advantages of possessing nuclear weapons become of increased value as global superpowers lose rationality, and lose respect for the rules of the international diplomatic game.

Adding to risks in the future is the increasing number of people in the world who seem to be prone to becoming god-maddened. God-maddened people do strange things.

Cast your mind back 422 years to 1587. Back then the world's preeminent military superpower was trying to suppress a stubborn insurgency of religious fanatics. A neighbor of the insurgents wondered if it should stick its oar in: provide arms and money and special forces and perhaps even "Revolutionary Guards" to the

insurgents. They decided to go ahead--that they ran next to no risk from thus tweaking the world's then-preeminent military superpower.

Why did the Privy Council of Elizabeth I Tudor decide to aid the revolt of the Protestant Netherlands against Spain? One reason was confidence that God was on their side: that if Phillip II Habsburg were to, in response to English intervention, send an Armada into the English Channel, that Jesus Christ and the Archangel Michael would come down to fight for the English alongside Sir Francis Drake, Richard Hawkins, and Lord Howard.

And in that Privy Councxil of Elizabeth I Tudor were some of the canniest po;iticians of any age, presided over by the canniest ruler England ever saw.

After the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the English court struck a victory medal. They did not praise their cannon makers or their cannoneers or their admirals Drake, Hawkins, and Howard. They praised the Lord: "God breathed, and they were scattered". It was a Divine Wind that had won the war.

24.2.2.2. After Catastrophe

Add up the chances, and it is clear that we should now be planning for what to do when and if we lose a city to nuclear fire over the next half century. There may well be some stupid miscalculation—most likely the confidence of some God-maddened colonel that divine intervention will protect him and his people, as God protected England in 1588; or alternatively the fear of some general that such a God-maddened colonel elsewhere is about to press the button. The city may be named Tehran or Islamabad or Delhi or Tel Aviv or Washington or London or Paris or Moscow or Beijing or Pyongyang or Seoul.

Then will come a moment of maximum political plasticity. After the next loss of a city to nuclear fire, the world will either come together to control its nuclear weapons or it will not. If it does not, then the risks of other future nuclear exchanges go way, way up. And if those risks rise high enough, then future historians will say that this entire book is beside the point—as irrelevant to the real world as was Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* irrelevant to the world of 1914.

And, of course, that the United Nations does not appear to have a plan for what to do should a city next year disappear in nuclear fire raises the odds of a bad outcome.

24.3. Global Warming

24.3.1. Missed Opportunities

The earth's cross-section intercepts 1.762×10^{17} watts of solar radiation: that is 343 watts for each square meter of earth's surface. Of that 343 watts, 34 are reflected back into space by the land and the water, 21 are reflected back into space by the atmosphere, and 44 are reflected back into space by the earth's cloud cover. That leaves 240 watts per square meter of solar radiation hitting the earth's surface and being absorbed. And so, if the earth's temperature is to be constant, the earth must in turn radiate 240 watts per square meter back into space.

Our current concentration of carbon dioxide, CO_2, locks inside the earth's atmosphere half of the energy that the earth radiates at wavelengths between 14 and 18 micrometers. If we were to double the atmospheric concentration, the added CO_2 would block the overwhelming bulk of the earth's radiation at such wavelengths. This is an important range of wavelengths. It is near the earth's radiation peak. Physicists tell us that a doubling of CO2 would reduce radiation from the earth back into space from 240 to 236 watts—if the earth's temperature were to remain constant. Then a global temperature rise of 2.2 Fahrenheit degrees would put us back into thermal equilibrium if nothing else were changing—if cloud cover, the polar icecaps, water vapor, and a bunch of other things we do not understand well were not to change. But other things will change—we just do not know what the changes will mean.

Scientists today give estimates of the increase in global temperatures from a doubling of CO_2 of 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit, and higher. But there is substantial uncertainty. And uncertainty here is really, really not our friend: it greatly increases risks, with no offsetting possible but uncertain benefits visible at all.

Back in the spring and early summer of 1993 it was my great honor and privilege to work at the U.S. Treasury for Al Gore's carbon tax proposal. Opposed to it were every single Republican member of the House for Representatives, but Democratic members stood up and passed it through the House—for which a number were demagogued by Republican challengers, and lost their jobs in the 1994 election. It then needed 50 votes in the Senate. It had 46. Opposed to it were four Democratic then-senators: Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, John Breaux of Louisiana, Ben Campbell of Colorado, and David Boren of Oklahoma. Also opposed to it were every single

Republican then-senator: Ted Stevens, Frank H. Murkowski, John McCain, Hank Brown, William Roth, Connie Mack, Paul Coverdell, Larry Craig, Dirk Kempthorne, Richard Lugar, Dan Coats, Chuck Grassley, Bob Dole, Nancy Kassebaum, Wendell H. Ford, Mitch McConnell, William S. Cohen, David Durenberger, Thad Cochran, Trent Lott, John C. Danforth, Kit Bond, Conrad Burns, Bob Smith, Pete Domenici, Al D'Amato, Jesse Helms, Lauch Faircloth, Don Nickles, Mark O. Hatfield, Bob Packwood, Arlen Specter, John H. Chafee, Strom Thurmond, Larry Pressler, Kay Bailey Hutchison, Phil Gramm, Orrin G. Hatch, Robert Foster Bennett, James Jeffords, John W. Warner, Charles S. Robb, Slade Gorton, Malcolm Wallop, and Alan K. Simpson.

That was the closest that the United States has ever come to passing a meaningful climate action plan.

Will global warming break civilization? Will the interaction of globalization with other weaknesses in our civilization break it? The odds are certainly much higher that it will than they were back in 1993.

24.3.2. The Opposition to Dealing with Global Warming

In many ways, the opposition to dealing with global warming is strange and difficult to understand. A shift to non-carbon sources of energy creates great opportunities for the growth of new industries, from which entrepreneurs, technologists, and workers can profit. A world shifting in a green direction will spend money like water to make those industries appear. Those currently making decisions and invested in carbon industry are well-positioned to take advantage of those opportunities.

And the value of their current economic positions in the carbon sector? Coal in the ground is now worth very little. Oil in the ground has a long-term use as a feedstock for organic chemistry which is unlikely to be much lower than its use as an energy source. The level of a carbon tax that it would be desirable to impose right now would, initially, be low: perhaps 100 dollars per ton at most, which is a dollar per gallon of gasoline. That is not enough to break or even seriously impair the finances of anyone outside the energy industry—especially if rebated.

I believe a generation from now those who have spent the last and will spend the next generation opposing dealing with global warming will have a very difficult time.

And I do not think historians in future centuries will understand the opposition—I do not understand it now.

24.3.3. The Course of Global Warming

It is too late to stop the first wave of global warming. No, I am not going to call it "climate change". As a result, the global climate is, on average, marching north by 4 miles a year—or maybe more or maybe less, or maybe much more. And it is becoming more variable: thermodynamics tells us that a system with more energy will over time occupy more configuration states. But over the next generation it is not so much the warming as the variability—especially the variability in precipitation, melt, and windspeed—that is the threat to human livelihood and life.

Already Berkeley, CA is like Santa Barbara, CA was in my youth. In the next generation California agriculture may lose its snowpack water source. These will, for a while, be annoyances for a rich state. But there are other places where global warming threatens catastrophe over the next generation, and it is highly likely that some of these catastrophes will happen.

There are currently two billion near-subsistence farmers living in the six great river valleys of Asia, from the Yellow all the way around to the Indus. These farmers have limited means and few non-agricultural skills. It would not be easy for them to pick up and relocate, let alone earn their livelihood doing something else. Asia's six great river valleys have supported most of human civilization for the past 5,000 years. During that time, the snow melt from the region's high plateaus has always arrived at precisely the right moment, and in precisely the right volume, to support the crops upon which the region's people rely.

A billion people depend on the monsoon arriving at the right time, and in the right place, each year. And yet, as the planet heats up and sea levels rise, the pattern of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and elsewhere will change. If they grow stronger and start roaring north toward the 250 million people living at or near sea level in the greater Ganges Delta, the world will face a long train of catastrophe.

The international community is in no way prepared for such a scenario. Indeed, the US, the wealthiest country in the world, wasn't even ready for Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Hurricane Sandy in New York, Hurricane Harvey in Houston, or Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, which is now estimated to have taken 2,975 lives. These four hurricanes have been among the most damaging in US history, and they have all occurred in just the past 15 years. The severity of their impact was not

merely a product of administrative incompetence or the increased density of coastal residential and commercial development. Rather, it was the predictable result of a changing climate. Even worse, as natural disasters go, these were small pinpricks compared to what the future holds in store if current trends continue.

24.3.4. Let Us Not Miss More Opportunities

The political cards will be reshuffled, and there will be a new deal on global warming, when America next elects a president in November 2020. By 2021, the US may have a State Department willing to speak up again. Unless we are extraordinarily fortunate and learn that climatologists have overlooked some enormously important channels of carbon sequestration, the models predicting global warming will still be grimly accurate.

When the time comes to revisit international policies on global warming, two things should happen. First, the world's industrial core must create incentives for the developing world to industrialize along an environmentally-friendly, C02- and CH4-light, path. Slow growth of greenhouse-gas emissions in rapidly-growing economies must be accompanied by credible promises to deliver massive amounts of assistance in the mighty tasks of industrialization, education, and urbanization that China, India, Mexico, Brazil, and many other developing countries face.

24.4. Stabilizing Democracy

Stabilizing democracy where it exists—and spreading it where it does not—is probably not a civilization-breaking challenge. There will still be a civilization if we fail. But it is an important challenge to surmount if the civilization the world builds in the twenty-first century is going to be a good civilization.

Democracy in the world today faces a problem of plutocracy: an arrogant rich growing in influence and power, with little patience for paying progressive taxes or for attempts to curb their influence in society. But, in my view at least, the big problem with the post-1990 public sphere is not so much that the rich speak with a loud voice, but that others whose voices if aggregated would be much more powerful do not speak, or are not heard at all. This point struck me very strongly after the 2008-2010 downturn. If the 2010s had been anything like the 1930s, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Conference Board would have been aggressively calling for more investment in America, and these arguments would have commanded the attention of the press. Labor unions would have had a

prominent voice as advocates for a high-pressure economy. Both would have had very powerful voices inside the political process through their support of candidates. Did the top 0.01% put something in the water to make the media freeze out such voices after 2008? No.

The problem is not so much that the plutocracy has grown stronger as that countervailing voices no longer have a respected social role. Paul Krugman—who fears the influence of plutocracy—said as much when he begged centrist politicians and the media "not to pull another 2011, treating the policy preferences of the 0.1% as the Right Thing as opposed to, well, what a certain small class of people want." For journalists, academics, elected officials, and concerned citizens generally, the first task is to ask oneself everyday: Whose voices are getting more attention than they deserve, and who isn't being heard at all? Ultimately, it is the public that will decide the fate of the public sphere.

Democracy also faces a problem of, well, incompetence. Neither Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Britain nor President Donald Trump in the United States would lead anybody in a non- or a not very-democratic country to think that they would be better governed if they were more democratic.

Democracies need to demonstrate that they can and will choose competent leaders, who understand both national and global interests and seek to advance them. At the moment, the United States is not able to demonstrate that it has a more competent and less corrupt government than China does. It has a government that does not seem to adhere to the rule of law. It is no longer interested in strengthening its high-tech innovation sector by welcoming workers and ideas from all over the world and rewarding them handsomely. The United States has a broken health-care system, subpar infrastructure, is stubbornly addicted to carbon energy, and has been unable to limit the undue political influence of the superrich.

Consider the tax bill that US Republicans doggedly pushed through Congress in 2017. It will not have any impact on economic growth – positive or negative – but it is reducing revenues by about 1% of national income. Those missing resources would most likely be transferred to the top 1% of earners, raising their share of total income from 22% to 23%, with the top 0.01% seeing their share of income rising from 5.1% to 5.5%. It is another medium-size brick in the wall of American plutocracy. Virtually any Republican in the House or Senate could have made it better, by conditioning their vote for it on the presentation of high-quality estimates that the tax bill would in fact boost investment and would accelerate economic growth. Yet none chose to do so.

For some 400 years, the Anglo-Saxon governance model – exemplified by the republican semi-principality of the Netherlands, the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom, and the constitutional republic of the United States of America – has been widely regarded as having hit the sweet spot of liberty, security, and prosperity. Nobody today thinks that is still true.

I, at least, am confident that a world in which democracy is viewed with suspicion —viewed as an inferior and outmoded form of rule because it cedes power to demagogues and chaos monkeys—will not be a good world. But democracy will be viewed with suspicion if it becomes its worst self.

24.5. Other Challenges

Other challenges will arise, both for the globe and for individual nations. What the new global challenges will be—besides global warming, the threat of nuclear war, and stabilizing democracy—we do not yet know. The will define the history of the twenty-first century, and beyond.

We do know one challenge the United States will face. The last years of the long twentieth century made it all but certain that the next century will not be an American century. After the 2000s, the United States is no longer trusted to be a global leader in security, but is instead viewed as a country liable to undertake "wars of choice" for reasons that seemed incomprehensible to others, not only in retrospect but at the time: France's president tried to be a good advisor and cautioner to George W. Bush, and in response the Republican congressional majorities renamed the French fries in the cafeteria in the U.S. Capitol "freedom fries". And after the second half of the 2010s, the United States will not be trusted to keep its word, or even to understand its own interest, in international or domestic economic matters as that. Add to that the fact that the 2010s are seeing China replace the United States as the world's largest economy, and the odds are overwhelming that the U.S. will not be in any sense a preeminent superpower in the future.

The Dutch Republic and the British Empire dealt with this reality after their zenith by working hard to arrange a soft landing: to create a world in which it would still be comfortable to be Holland or Britain long after they no longer had the power to be preeminent. In the late 1680s the Dutch shifted from opposing Britain to engaging with it, providing key support to an aristocratic Whig faction that led to a

durable alliance based on the two powers' joint interests in limited government, mercantile prosperity, and anti-Catholicism, in which the Dutch were the junior partner, but a partner. More than a century later, the British Empire eventually adopted a similar strategy of engagement and cooperation with America. This culminated, as Harold Macmillan unwisely (because too publicly) put it when he was seconded to General Eisenhower's staff in North Africa during World War II, in Britain playing Greece to America's Rome. As a result, the US became Britain's staunchest geopolitical ally of the twentieth century—and the American alliance was a pair of wired aces in the hole for the British Empire from 1917 to 1955.

There is much wisdom in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," the 1947 article by US diplomat George F. Kennan. Three of Kennan's points stand out. First, he wrote, US policymakers should not panic, but recognize the long game, and play it. Second, America should never try to act unilaterally, but rather assemble broad alliances. Third, America should become its best self: other countries will love it, and respect it, and be willing to ally with it only if it is lovely.