

# Phases of Collapse

by Bill Herbst

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Back in the “old days” — by which I mean the waning years of the 20th century — the idea of civilizational collapse was not yet a popular meme. Heck, it’s still not “popular,” but it’s certainly a meme now that has gained considerable traction. Anyway, even back then, two or three decades ago, some people were aware of the possibility (even perhaps the probable likelihood) of the collapse of modern society. I was among them.

The people that saw this were not always particularly vocal about their opinion — a few were, but most weren’t. Some who kept their thoughts and feelings private did so out of concern for possible social ostracism. Becoming a Cassandra or a “Doomer” meant risking the acceptance and privilege that came with career status. They didn’t want to endanger their success or their livelihoods. Many others kept silent out of hope that the better angels of our nature might prevail, and that civilization would pull back from the abyss before it was too late.

Whether or not we were openly assertive about collapse, those of us who saw it looming ahead began to consider the ways it might occur if it really happened. What conditions might lead to collapse? What would the initial phases look like? What would the triggers be? We tried out the many traditional horsemen of apocalypse to see how they fit possible scenarios — financial and economic disaster were obvious choices, as was global war and the fight for limited resources. The already-established and growing concern with environmental degradation and climate disruption provided a virtual plethora of scenarios — drought, famine, fire, flood, and all the rest of Mother Nature’s predictable attempts to use fever to combat the human infection.

And any of these are still possible, since collectively we have done nothing to forestall any of them. In my view, they are all more likely than they were 20 or 30 years ago.

Certainly a case could be made that the COVID pandemic qualifies as a precursor of civilizational collapse. And yet, I am hesitant to go down that road. By itself, COVID was insufficient (in my view).

Gradually, throughout the last six years, and increasing dramatically over the past year and a half, a new idea about the precursor of collapse has taken shape in my thinking. While I don't want to put any emphasis on electoral politics, which I regard now as an empty, painful, and pathetic exercise in bread and circuses, just another in the endless forms of Death Culture, I think it may be convenient to use the past two Presidential elections as markers in the sand.

The unexpected political rise of Donald Trump in 2016 marks the beginning of the six years, providing four years of ramping up, while Joe Biden's succession into the White House in 2021 defines the second phase that began a more dramatic acceleration.

So, if I'm not focusing on electoral politics, then to what am I referring? What is the precursor to civilizational collapse that I'm witnessing? I've written around this over the past two years in my blog commentaries and have even stated it plainly on more than one occasion, but I want to present it here in a slightly different light.

I had thought, along with many other people, that the initial stages of collapse — the triggers — would be literal. I assumed that some disruption would occur that was stark and tangible, metaphorically like the Titanic hitting the iceberg. I now believe that I was wrong. Hell, I think we were all wrong.

The precursor that has happened — the trigger that is occurring — is *collective madness*. People are going crazy. This may or may not be happening around the world. I'm not sure. But it sure as hell is happening in America. The whole damned country seems to have lost its freaking mind.

But wait, Bill. If we've gone crazy, doesn't that imply that we were sane in the past? Well, sort of, but not really. Throughout American history, certain individuals have embraced sanity in specific facets of their lives. No one was perfectly or completely sane (even saints have feet of clay), but some people did fairly well in representing the

best qualities of humanity. Lots of them, actually. But what I'm referring to here is America as a collective — all of us together.

Collectively, our "mental-emotional health" has waxed and waned, with pockets and periods of relative sanity. But the pockets were always distinctly limited, and the periods decidedly brief in duration. Admittedly, too, some longstanding American ideals have been laudable, even though we rarely practiced what we preached. In short, there's much in American history to recommend as worthwhile.

Through our entire history, however, insanity and madness have lurked as a consistent underbelly.

The best metaphor I can come up with is that our collective insanity is like the magma dome inside a volcano. On rare occasions, the pressure builds to a peak of intensity that's released in a devastating volcanic eruption, such as occurred in the American Civil War.

What's happening now, however, isn't like that. Rather than a spectacular Mount St. Helens-style eruption, we're getting something akin more to Kilauea in Hawaii, where lava is overflowing — oozing rather than erupting — where the magma flow is slow and steady, yet unstoppable.

As a result, on any given day, things look pretty similar to how they were the day before. Maybe one or two isolated houses are gobbled up by the advancing lava flow, catching fire and burning to the ground, but most life continues, seemingly unaffected. That's an illusion, however, just a trick of perspective. Viewed from a longer time-frame, as would be revealed by time-lapse photography, the magma flow is shown to be an onslaught, a literal juggernaut, a force that decimates everything in its path.

That's my opinion about the current state of American consciousness. We are now the dragon eating its own tail. Hundreds of millions of Americans have gone mad, and many of them don't even know it. Those individuals who resist the madness are under great pressure. Some hold down the fort through personal grace and strength, but many are hanging on to by their fingertips.

We've already seen the results of this madness over the past years in terrible decisions and grievous errors of policy on the part of those

in charge. But equally, the social landscape of popular beliefs and opinions is now utterly phantasmagorical. If you were Rip Van Winkle and just awakening from nearly any earlier decade in American history, you wouldn't recognize the country. Damned little would make sense.

I have numerous concerns about our madness that range from the mundane to the profound (and from the sublime to the ridiculous), but my most practical concern is that this zeitgeist of insanity is setting the stage for more tangible and literal manifestations of collapse.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, life for most Americans continues in large part to feel weirdly normal. I say "weirdly" because the pandemic redefined normalcy to something a lot less dependable. While the pandemic didn't cause the madness, it has made the emergence far less noticeable. What's happening now is "normal" in similar fashion to a period that occurred in 1940, at the beginning of World War II. Called "*the Phoney War*," (British spelling) this was an eight-month phase after Germany invaded Poland when Europe held its breath, hoping that nothing more would happen. Fat chance.

I wish I could say that I believed our current madness to be like a fever that will break soon, but I don't see it that way. I think instead that this is a welling up of deep disturbances in our psyches that we have long kept hidden — locked in the basement, so to speak — and which have gained strength and toxicity in the darkness. This insanity has been escaping from confinement in dribs and dabs throughout the first two decades of this 21st century, but now the restraining walls have come down. The cage is unlocked and open. The madness has escaped, run amok, and is spreading like wildfire.

I worry that it's a very short trip from where we are currently to someplace a lot more starkly disrupted, difficult, and decidedly unpleasant, and my hunch is that we won't have to wait too long to find out what that next phase is.