

Inevitability

by Bill Herbst

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As I struggle to understand what is happening in America and, perhaps to a lesser extent (although maybe not lesser at all), the rest of modern civilization, I find myself approaching a strange conclusion. I've believed for some time (more than a decade) that the horrors I saw developing in the culture, politics, and psychology of Americans were not new or even particularly aberrant. Instead, it has seemed to me more and more reasonable to assume that what was happening then (in earlier decades of my life), and is now occurring with an intensity that approaches frenzy, grew from seeds planted long ago — more than six centuries back.

I have come to believe that from that point on the collapse of modern civilization was inevitable. It's probably worth noting that my use of the word "believe" here is technically a misnomer. Belief implies certainty, and I'm not certain that my theory is valid or reliable. After all, this particular thesis is not about hard facts or measurable evidence. It's a judgment about an intangible that involves both reason and emotion on my part. However, to say that I "believe" this theory is probably closer to the truth of my feelings than a more cautious term, such as "considering" the theory.

What I refer to as the "six centuries back" mark is the discovery of the western hemisphere — the so-called New World — by European explorers at the end of the 15th century. History books note the year as 1492, when the three-ship expedition of Columbus — the fabled Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria that had been commissioned and outfitted by Queen Isabella of Spain to find a new sea trade route to the Far East — managed to cross the Atlantic Ocean and splash ashore onto the native-occupied islands of the Caribbean now called the Bahamas.

That particular point in history is admittedly at least a little arbitrary. We could go back considerably further, to the beginnings of "civilization" that anthropology currently considers to have begun about 12-13,000 years ago. The reason I don't go back that far is that humanity had many chances along the way since then to change our trajectory. We didn't mostly, but we could have. In my opinion, European colonization of the two western hemisphere continents (North America and South America) marks the point in time where the die was cast, where all possible futures for humanity narrowed down to become a more singular and inevitable future.

Although many individuals over the past six centuries have developed and expressed potentials in their natures that are laudable and deserving of praise —

kindness, compassion, humility, thoughtfulness, foresight, empathy, modest self-restraint, and even non-violence, to name just a few sterling qualities — humanity as a whole has not done so, not even a little. What we've done (and still do) collectively, as a civilization and a species, seems to encourage and embody many of the worst elements of mob psychology. Domination by force is preferred over gentle inclusion by love.

Not that the mob makes decisions. Individuals make decisions, but they are influenced powerfully in their attitudes, desires, and choices by the social climate of accepted group belief. In the main, humans have been and remain creatures of their times, socially and culturally.

Let me offer just a couple of examples from among the thousands of possible illustrations of our mass psychology. Some humans have always resisted the practice of slavery. They didn't own slaves nor participate in the business of the slave trade. But their disapproval and non-participation didn't keep others from the aggressive practice of enslavement as an accepted institution.

Another example is the refusal to take part in the violence of war. Throughout history, certain individuals have resisted enlistment into the military. They actively didn't want to be soldiers, because, for any of numerous reasons, they believed that war and violence were wrong. In the 20th century, we called these people "conscientious objectors." Of these, many still served in some military capacity, such as orderlies or nurses in the medical corps, but a fair number actually fled their countries or went to prison as a symbolic protest against what they saw as barbaric, immoral, and unjust.

The vast majority of men, however, went along with the cultural enthusiasm for war, sometimes reluctantly, but more often with great gusto. And this zeal for war wasn't limited just to men. Women also were caught up in war fever, often as cheerleaders for war as a masculine rite of passage for men to prove their mettle. Letters to soldiers in the American Civil War from sweethearts and family womenfolk are commonly brimming with exhortations to their husbands, sons, and sweethearts to do their duty as soldiers and acquit themselves with honor by showing bravery on the battlefield.

At this juncture, I need to stop the narrative of this commentary and navigate a fairly sharp turn. My intention with this brief essay isn't to "make a case" for my theory about the inevitability of our species' downfall from its pinnacle of apparent hyper-success. Demonstrating the truth of the theory is not the point. Neither is convincing anyone of its veracity.

No, the reasons for discussion of this theory in my weekly blog are poetic and psychotherapeutic. I think there may be some solace in seeing our collective reality through this particular lens. These days, some of us are grappling with numerous heart-rending and soul-wrenching questions about our current social condition in America and elsewhere, where a nasty kind of collective madness threatens to overwhelm everyone's sanity. These questions, while technically different, tend to coalesce in heading down a certain road toward judgments

about humanity: *How did we get here? Where did we go wrong? Why can't we do better? Is there any hope left at all?*

Those questions (and other similar inquiries) allow for many possible "answers." Most of the answers, however are very disturbing to our emotional well-being. Even optimism and hope about our solving the many dilemmas that beset humanity and could lead us to a better future may be treacherous, because they set us up for crushing disappointments in the near- and middle-term (say, the next five years). It's clear as a bell that, over the coming years of the mid-2020s, America is in for a very bad time. I worry that the psychic cost of hope and optimism may be extremely expensive at this point.

The one answer to the questions about how we got here, where we went wrong, and why we can't seem to even begin to save ourselves that (for me, at least) lessens rather than increases the pain about our collective failure is this:

We didn't have a choice.

My theory of inevitability is based on looking backward in time and attempting to find various crossroads where we (meaning society and civilization) might have chosen a different path forward than we did. What I come up with, time and again, is that all the many apparent options weren't equally real or viable. Some were hypothetically possible, but not literally feasible. Some were dramatically more likely to be chosen and implemented than others. Given human nature, group social behavior, and the circumstances of each time period, I can see in hindsight that only a very limited number of options could have been selected, all of which were variations on the theme of Death Culture.

For instance, in the financial meltdown of 2008, we could have let the big banks fail. No bailouts, no Quantitative Easing from the Fed, no rescue of the rogue financial institutions that were responsible for the meltdown. We could have prosecuted at least one greedy CEO. That would have been a wise choice in the long run. But it was not a *viable* choice. Letting the chips fall where they might would have required a massive and wholesale restructuring of our entire economy. It would have caused immense distress to millions of Americans, and the poorest among us might have suffered disproportionately. On top of that, many of the elites in power would have had to step down and give up their wealth, power, and privileged status. In short, it was never going to happen.

Or consider 9-11. In the aftermath of the Twin Towers coming down, what were the chances that America would take a good, hard look at itself and give up the dominant and violent hegemony that we had so carefully and successfully crafted ever since the middle of World War II as the one indispensable nation, the country that called all the shots, the world's 800-lb. gorilla? In other words, what were the odds that we would pull back from the ongoing depredations of the American Empire? Not a snowball's chance in hell.

Given everything we know about the way things were at the time, the only response that could have been expected was the one that occurred, namely,

the savage and brutal military invasions of two countries, neither of which were responsible for the 9-11 attacks. All that transpired afterwards — the bogus War on Terror, the rampant xenophobia, the draconian Homeland Security apparatus, the broadening of Deep State power, and the numerous other examples of personal and collective insanity that ensued — were effectively inevitable. Given the massive tide of faux-patriotic fervor for vengeance, there was zero chance of our turning the other cheek. The fix was in for Death Culture.

As far as I can tell, it's been like this at nearly every crossroads in our history for the past 600 years. The "better angels of our nature" have literally never won out. We invoke those angels in words such as equality, freedom, justice, and democracy. And many people believe those words to have reflected our sincere motivations. But when push came to shove, those words were just a cover, mere propaganda. Time after time, we went with the lowest common denominator. We chose emotion over reason, violence instead of peace, greed over generosity, and power rather than love. Even when wisdom managed an occasional rare victory, the results were eventually corrupted or overturned. Every good and noble thing we do as a civilization is co-opted for nefarious ends.

Here's the twist, though. None of what's happened implies that humans are incapable of love, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, inclusion, empathy, humility, and all the other admirable qualities that come from the heart and the soul. Those qualities occur in abundance in our species, but only through individuals. Not all individuals, of course, but many. At the collective level, however, those qualities barely exist, hardly operate at all, and never win out.

Think of what's happening to humanity and this species as an algae bloom. Algae blooms are spectacular, relatively sudden increases in the reproduction rates of algae in bodies of water. The "bloom" brings with it toxic effects that are deadly to other life in the ecosystem and may in some cases pollute the environment for a very long time, but the bloom may also result in the sudden collapse and die-off of the algae themselves. Bloom and then die is a reality.

As humans, we are now far into the phase of our "bloom" — melodramatic, spectacular, and toxic. You and I and our children are witnessing the bloom and participating in it, whether eagerly or reluctantly, willing or not. What we're living through is extraordinary, awesome, and terrible. Our children's children will witness (and be subject to) the die-off.

This was inevitable, and — at the species level — is not tragic. It's just what Mother Nature does. Self-destruction happens to every species on the earth that succeeds wildly and disrupts the harmonic interdependence of its ecosystem. Too much success is not a good thing, and that's what has happened to us.

So, let us not despair. We can't stop the bloom, and the die-off is built in. The best we can do is to love well — ourselves and others — wherever and however we can, for as long as we get.