

D 3. THE PRESENT SITUATION AS A BASIS FOR THE FUTURE

We are living in the greatest period in human history--and are approaching the most uncertain period. Those of us lucky enough to be born in the industrialized nations, and to the right parents, enjoy a level of material comforts never before attained by large numbers of people. Nor are present blessings entirely material; never before have so many people had access to great artistic and literary works. Modern industrial civilization is the living proof that the lot of mankind need not be abject and grinding poverty for all but a small ruling class. The fruits of an industrial civilization are desired by almost all who are aware of them but have not yet had full access to them, namely the poor both in the industrial nations and in the rest of the world.

On the face of the matter, it would appear that the accomplishments of modern civilization stem largely from the use of modern technologies in production, especially the use of specialized machinery for many different productive tasks, and from the development of human skills in the use of that technology. So a major concern is the protection of investment in technological advance, and schooling, despite the general scramble of everyone for an ever greater share of the abundance for themselves.

It should be equally obvious, though we seldom stress it, that none of those accomplishments would be possible if we each relied primarily upon our individual abilities. The great economic accomplishments are due to the fact that we are cooperating, often in large business institutions, to produce together with modern technology most of what we produce. Most of our products are joint products of many people who cooperate in making them in business organizations.

We have some say in who governs us, and have some restrictions on the arbitrary exercise of their power over us. We participate in a wide range of individual and social activities in our free time, of which there is more now than ever. We have expected the future to be ever better. And the only dark cloud we have feared, the communist bugaboo, has shrunk to minor proportions unless we are stupid enough to start a cold war with China.

But the accomplishments of our proud civilization represent only part of the picture. The widespread ideas which guide our actions may mislead us rather than save us in the uncertain period ahead. Our civilization is yet young, and it is not impossible for it to decline and become a thing of the past as have previous civilizations. Let us consider some things that may need to be altered if that is not to be either a short run or a long run prospect.

The world is still trapped in a war system¹, and although the recent cold war is over, nuclear or biological or chemical warfare could threaten civilization again if we continue our tried and unreliable methods of "keeping

the peace". The concern properly expressed about the danger from small amounts of nuclear radiation or isolated nuclear accidents should tell us that it is idiocy for nations to pretend to protect themselves in the future by new powers getting into a nuclear arms race for "defense". There are still enough nuclear bombs to annihilate all major cities on earth and contaminate all else by fallout. Shall this civilization substitute biological warfare, the outcome of which might be equally or more disastrous? Or is there a way to provide national security and avoid all such dangers to it and to all human civilization? What could be done to ensure a peaceful human future, if anything? A later essay will deal with that question.

Our civilization must also change some of its other ways or it could commit suicide slowly rather than rapidly. Our world could end either "with a bang or a whimper". But either prospect we should do our very best to avert.

The rapid increase in the scale of the world's economy has implications to which we will have to adjust, for better or for worse. Present trends cannot indefinitely yield increasing affluence. Disaster may ensue if some are not altered soon enough. Population cannot grow forever by greater absolute amounts each year, as world population is now doing. If we are unwilling to give up our polluting processes or products, increasing pollution may very seriously harm the biosphere upon which life itself depends. Our present affluence is based in large measure also on exhaustible natural resources which we are utilizing at ever increasing rates. How close do we need to come to a non-polluting and non-depleting technology for a sustainable economy. For what sized population could it provide material well-being?

But even if population stabilizes at a level which a hoped-for technology could support indefinitely in affluence, this civilization may continue to rot from within. There are signs on every hand. The attitude, spread widely throughout the social structure, that one should "get what one can while the getting is good, and to hell with anyone who interferes with me" is not conducive to real community of interests and values. Business itself seeks to exploit the consumer with misleading advertising, and supports its elite lavishly. No wonder there is increasing alienation among people who are unable to climb into the middle class.

Increasingly expensive government has been increasingly unable to handle even its regular functions adequately, let alone deal with new problems competently. People are understandably losing faith in politicians who promise much and then deliver government of, by and for special interests and fail to protect and advance the public interest. Yet non-voters leave government in special interests hands. The public is unaware that it is responsible for making it impossible for anyone to get elected who does not promise the public more than can be delivered.

The increasing instability of marriage is weakening homes. Schools have tried to teach more than ever, but more youth than ever emerge molded by popular youth (peer group) cultures and counter-cultures, and without the basic competencies our civilization needs. AIDS, the drug culture and crime spread.

It is no longer safe to walk the streets in most cities after dark--civilized cities indeed!! Shoplifting is common, and white collar crime in business is more profitable. Polarization of racial biases is outpacing the growth of understanding and shared experiences that could produce civilized behavior. Some youth cultures sport cop-killer songs and violent gangs. If these and other such trends grow at the expense of those values on which civilization rests, disintegration is only a question of time.

Great as we may feel the accomplishments of the present era to be, and desirous as we may be to go forward in the same way to bigger and better things for us in the future, the path into the future is a treacherous one. How much farther we can go in the same way is problematical--the farther the more treacherous, and sooner or later the demise of our civilization might be assured unless we can change our ways enough to resolve our increasingly serious problems. If however they are resolved successfully, the prospective future could indeed be bright.

In a 1998 book, WHICH WORLD? Scenarios for the 21st Century: Global Destinies, Regional Choices, based upon much recent research, Allen Hammond pictures 3 possible worlds (1) an unsustainable & inequitable global market world, (2) a violent world, and (3) a transformed world that would be more desirable. He is optimistic that creative people can shape the future intelligently if they put their minds and efforts into doing so.

To those who expect and want a good future ahead of them and a good future for subsequent generations, it is a challenging time to be alive. It is a time when one can have a hand, whether small or large, in the momentous changes that need to be made--changes that can improve the quality of life as well as changes that can rescue civilization from treacherous paths. Youth in particular has ever so much at stake.