

Two Twenty-Year Views – George Rebane, 5 August 2007

Over the last several months my friend James R. Dickenson (author and retired national affairs journalist for *The Washington Post*) and I have been discussing the current polity of our country and where all the various domestic and international stirrings may be taking us as a nation and a people. We are both students of history and avid observers of humanity's fears and foibles with careers well placed to peer into the foggy future. A couple of weeks ago I asked Dick to draft the most likely landscape of our world twenty years out. Dick responded with a comprehensive piece (appended hereto), and in a return email asked me to likewise pen my view, which is the present piece. So here we have two offerings - Dick's view from the perspective of a respected and nationally known member of our fourth estate, and a self-declared New Deal Democrat; and mine as a WW2 era immigrant, career technocrat, and entrepreneurial capitalist. Our mutual friend Pat Tobin had the idea that, perhaps, this exchange should see a broader audience. The interested reader may google both of us for more details on our backgrounds.

Our prognostications differ markedly, one can even say they are diametrical. There are many aspects of my own vision which disturb me. Against these I continue to work, inspired by the words of Bonaro Overstreet's 'Stubborn Ounces'.

*You say the little efforts that I make
will do no good; they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where justice hangs in balance.*

*I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.*

As a systems scientist my musings often take a structured form which allows certain (de)formed brains to more easily understand and manipulate such arcane notions. To me the future will be determined by and fashioned from the confluence of several major geopolitical and technology related themes –

- The under-educated American worker confronting globalization and the onrush of human-transforming technology (aka The Singularity).
 - Immigration and the worldwide movement toward mono-culturalism.
 - China's emergence as the pre-eminent economic then political power on earth.
 - The demise of republican democracies on a global scale.
1. Two hundred years ago Thomas Jefferson observed 'a nation ignorant and free, that never was and never shall be'. That admonition well explains why republican democracies have a hard time taking root and why established ones are now on the wane. The recent essay by Bryan Caplan (*The Myth of the Rational Voter*) collects a large body of economic thought and research on the American electorate, and assembles it

into a politically incorrect and disturbing whole. The major conclusion is that the touted underpinning of a democracy, known as the Principle of Aggregation, does not work. It is this principle that for decades was cited as the pillar upon which the survival of the historically short-lived democracies would now rest. It carefully explained how an overwhelmingly ignorant electorate could still be tolerated in a democracy so that the tiny informed minority would carry the day and reasoned policies would emerge to guide the nation. Well, it ain't been so and Caplan gives a lucid account of the whys and wherefores. This societal disease is not restricted to America which has already been outpaced by the EU countries toward sovereign dysfunctionality. Led by China and Russia, the rest of the world will short-circuit this great experiment and go directly toward pragmatic autocracies with a firm grip on targeted areas of capitalism. Major continents like South America and Africa will skip the process altogether and go directly to authoritarian collectivism.

2. The face of the United States will be determined by the under-educated American worker and the demographics of uncontrolled borders. The post-communist world has again demonstrated that all peoples, no matter how small their number, want a piece of real estate in which they and their culture are sovereign. The beneficial function of a single 'public culture' has been demonstrated again and again in its numerous violations. America had such a public culture as recently as fifty years ago. Immigrants were free to celebrate their own cultures when they gathered in private, but in the public square they were often the super-Americans bringing together the best of theirs and what already was in place. Public education then taught assimilation. The values and mores of such public cultures allow all of its members to reliably predict each others' behaviors thereby establishing a basis of facile trust on which all levels of social intercourse can proceed with minimal third party oversight, mediation, and regulation. This benefit is now gone and our disparate multi-cultural societies must be watched ever more closely and carefully by the state, and our doings mediated by legions of lawyers all of whom can invoke the state's fearsome 'power of the bayonet'. With exploding volumes of sunsetless regulations, the 'rights' of the citizens have become nothing but semantic playthings for the media, 'rights' that in truth are ratcheting our freedoms down into narrower and narrower courses of permitted action.
3. The confluence of nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and machine intelligence will ultimately force humans to either 'climb aboard' the train to a trans-human future or be left behind as a kept species by the earth's new masters. In the literature and debate about such futures this epochal transition is known as The Singularity. (The advent of the Singularity is projected as soon as twenty years by various scientists and futurists.) The fact that almost no-one knows about this or can see its relentless daily march is testimony to the already bifurcated society along the lines of intellect, education, and careers whose shorthand is the so-called alfa-beta problem. In America the educational system is broken beyond timely repair, and therefore the betas will have no choice but to vote for policies that forcefully garner them a share of the wealth produced by the alfas. Fortunately, for the short-term, the growing state has become the employer of last resort needing ever more people to administer and enforce its

bulging regulations. But ultimately productivity will dominate, and it is then that the betas will not be able to compete and retain their accustomed standard of living. The likely alternative here and elsewhere will be a new and more widespread luddite rebellion – if you can't work it, destroy it. However, in the interval the state's technology abetted power will have grown so that popular revolutions will become a thing of the past. Revolutions have always begun with access to some level of par force with the state. In developed nations such par force scenarios are hard to contemplate today, let alone with the monitoring, interdiction, and counter-strike capabilities that the state will have in twenty years. On that road the luddites will be mollified politically and substantially with the distribution of bread and circuses to divert the diminishing populations of the terminally ignorant. Elitists abetted by the alfas will rule from inaccessible seats of power.

4. This century belongs to China under whose political, technological, and military umbrellas the third world will be developed (or colonized). Cohorts such as India, SE Asian countries, and a new secular Islam will gladly pile on to become sources of cheap labor and new markets. Globalization in the next twenty years will be required by China and India for social stability and achieving their long awaited place in the sun. Through their dim lights America's betas will vote then militate for more protectionism in the vain hope that somehow the principle of comparative worth will become as ineffective on the ground as it is unknown in their intellects. Draconian measures will be legislated to keep America's wealth and talent from escaping. Fiat money will rule through the re-prohibition of private ownership of precious metals. But in the end, the US, in its entirety or in parts, will rejoin the world community under agreements dictated elsewhere. Our workers will have to compete on the basis of merit, which is simply being rewarded for productivity and successfully undertaking risk. Fogging a mirror with self-esteem will no longer serve.
5. China will also continue to expand its influence globally using the already demonstrated American model of assuring sources of raw materials and then turning such sources into markets for its goods. Today the Chinese proclaim 'non-interference in internal affairs' as their knock-off of our former motto for successfully acquiring raw materials from Africa and South America. That brand of 'non-interference' effectively interferes just enough to keep the compliant autocratic regimes in power while the Chinese satisfy their needs. We perfected the schema during the 19th century and worked it to great success during the 20th. Now that we have developed scruples that exclude our national interests, our friends in China have stepped in to fill the void. Over the next twenty years they will show in spades how that policy will propel their economy and promote their national interests. Shrinking Russia will try the same maneuver but will be effective only in its contiguous regions. The lingering memories of heavy-handed efforts toward international communism still cast a long shadow.
6. Demographics will dominate. The Hispanic reconquista of our southwest will either prepare it for secession as a new sovereign Hispanic state (no one will want to remake the Mexican mistakes) or as a culturally cohesive region of the US. With examplars worldwide, cultural cohesion will have become the political issue of the epoch. To

explain away and attempt mitigation of America's loss of world prominence, major political forces will arise in the country. The northwest, with possibly British Columbia joining in, will seek entrepreneurial resurgence, drawing America's orientals to its already prominent ethnic Chinese base. Commerce will rule in this new gateway to China. The Mormons may finally realize their longed for autonomy in the Great Basin and call home believers from far and wide. The south of Dixie shall rise again as a dominant Protestant Christian region using religion to soothe the economic insults to the faithful. The northeast will finally be prepared for unfettered practice of the longed for collectivism with which it could not saddle the rest of the country. The resulting fierce poverty of the region may make it seek alliances with whatever countries of similar persuasion remain of the EU. The central states will focus on agriculture, becoming a leading food supplier with its economic fortunes tied to global hunger and the availability of water. Canada will conform itself politically and economically to a United States which will now be in the throes of refashioning itself into a confederation of semi-autonomous, culturally cohesive regions. The depletion of Mexican oil reserves will plunge it to new levels of misery and ripen it for another populist revolution.

7. Along the way into that future the Republican Party will self-destruct having forsaken its long-stated principles and goals of smaller government, spending constraint, lower taxes, and individual freedoms. In its place will emerge a splintering of parties all claiming the mantle of libertarian ideals and/or the Grand Old Party of yore. Having remained true to its collectivist policies and class warfare objectives, the Democratic Party will dominate by continuing to redistribute the wealth of the remaining educated and 'rich'. Australia and New Zealand will have the opportunity to attract western alphas from all over the world and will likely become the new enclave of technology and entrepreneurship as the Singularity approaches.

In counterpoint to the above, appended here is the text of James R. (Dick) Dickenson's laug07 email to me that lays out the basis for a different and more hopeful view of the next twenty years. After apologizing for its length, Dick goes on to "indulge" himself with the following well-formed analysis to which the above may serve as a polemic.

My predictions for the next 20 years will be pessimistic about our global situation, tentative and pedestrian domestically. If I had greater vision and imagination I would be a novelist or poet rather than a journalist.

I'm pessimistic globally because I don't see that we've made much progress in freeing ourselves of the World War II/Cold War mind set of relying on overwhelming military power and technology to win traditional wars against traditional-type enemies. Combine this with our invincible ignorance of the areas of our national interest, which was repeated step by step in Iraq despite the precedent of Vietnam. We need to start learning the mind sets of our enemies in order to effectively fight them and to see opportunities to exploit politically and diplomatically. The fragmentation of the insurgents in Iraq is an ex-

ample; there seems to be an opening to exploit Sunni sheiks in Anbar who were formerly shooting at us who now, temporarily at least, want to shoot at al-Queda terrorists.

The war against terrorists will take enormous patience, time, and effort (labor intensive), which the so-called "surge" in Iraq is demonstrating. We have to have both military and civilian people on the ground for years at a time to stabilize an area we're, in this case Iraq, while conducting intensive diplomacy all over the globe, while, again, hopefully learning something about the areas of our national interests. So what do we have this past week? The administration announcing a \$20 billion arms sale program to Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and others in an attempt to intimidate and isolate Iran. Note that all of these except Israel are autocratic police states terrified by fundamentalist Islamic terrorists, in this case Shiites. Not an auspicious outlook.

It will take great effort and patience to undo the blunders of the Bush administration. In the meantime there is little evidence that our Homeland Security Agency is working very well. There are stories that as many as 25 percent of the top positions are still unfilled and last week the House illustrated what a pork barrel project it is when a subcommittee finally voted to allot money to areas that are most threatened rather than those most populated. In other words, Minneapolis gets a lot of money now whereas Oak Ridge and other vulnerable nuclear areas don't. And you should hear the affected Congressmen scream. Books and articles are starting to emerge expressing alarm at our inability to detect and head off domestic terrorist attacks and our ability to deal with their after effects better than in the Hurricane Katrina fiasco.

Our intelligence apparatus is equally rickety with every agency, Defense, State, Vice President, etc., having its own intelligence system to justify its priorities, such as the invasion of Iraq and the need for warrantless surveillance. Critics are now making the case that the CIA has missed most of the big developments going all the way back to the Chinese entering the Korean War and the Soviet development of the A-bomb, to say nothing of WMD. At the same time we're in an intense struggle between the need for national security and the erosion of our Constitutional civil liberties by a radical and autocratic—and incompetent—administration.

I see us in a great power confrontation with China by then, militarily as well as economically, probably complicated by a resurgent Russia, militarizing Japan, and nuclear proliferation. Will we have leaders with the wisdom and vision to deal with this? Do Hillary, Rudy, Obama, Romney, McCain inspire a lot of confidence? To ask the question is to answer it. Right now I'm not terribly hopeful but I have always been an optimist. I would be more optimistic if I thought our recent history—the last 40 years going back to our involvement in Vietnam—showed more progress in dealing with these weaknesses.

I think we'll be in a substantially worse climate and environmental situation simply because of great third world economic development. Once we're rid of this 19th Century administration, however, the U.S. will probably improve its efforts to protect the environment because we have a record of doing so sporadically but I think global warming is on the march and everybody, meaning the whole world, is going to have to get a lot more

scared about it before any progress can be made. I'm more optimistic about our developing a sane energy policy because market forces do push us in that direction but it won't offset the developing world.

Domestically, I don't see the U.S. as being systemically different or having undergone profound changes in social, economic, or political organization and orientation, with the obvious caveat that no one can foresee the sort of forces that effect such changes, which I'll go into further in a moment. I don't see them on the horizon. The immigration problem might do this because there's a potentially huge fight between the economic forces that favor unlimited immigration and people who worry about the cultural impact of such large numbers of Hispanics. So far commerce has won out.

The reason I'm so conservative is that the country is very conservative, more so than our Western European counterparts. There are several reasons for this:

1. The nation was settled primarily by people seeking economic opportunity. Some, such as the Pilgrims, Jews, the Volga Germans, refugees from the Revolution of 1848, and assorted others, were escaping religious and political persecution but most were economically motivated. The dream of becoming rich, or one's children hitting it big, is powerful in this country.

2. The enormous size and complexity of the country creates an inertia that makes radical change difficult if not impossible. The good news is that this gives us social, economic, and political stability, the bad news is that it makes necessary changes such as health care affordability and delivery, rational energy policy, environmental protection, etc., very, very difficult.

3. Patriotism and pride in being an American is an example of good conservatism. For many, however, it means American exceptionalism, which borders on the belief that we're God's chosen people. We have been far more successful in assimilating our immigrants than Western European countries, which never had the slightest intention of making citizens of the Middle East, North African, Turkish, and others who they encouraged as cheap labor; the periodic riots, such as those in Paris, are the result. This has a great deal to do with the power of the American Dream and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, despite the fact that we often don't live up to them—starting with slavery. This is an enormously powerful social glue and I was struck by it during the late '60s and early '70s when we had the confluence of the counterculture revolution of the Boomer generation with its drugs, sex, and anarchical rejection of the so-called establishment, along with the enormously divisive Vietnam War (which still is, vide the Swift Boat attacks in 2004), the civil rights revolution, and the women's movement. That was a powerful quad-fecta (if I may coin such a term) and having two children in their teens at the time gave me a sense of vulnerability to these centrifugal forces and the feeling that it could all fall apart at any moment. But it didn't. The Center held, to paraphrase Yeats, and proved to be impressively strong. Watergate, in my opinion, confirmed the strength of the Center as it was a dramatic real-life example of the workings of the Constitutional checks and balances.

My first thought about this question was to try to calculate the changes we've undergone in the past 20 years. Again, systemically and basically not much. We've had events—the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet empire, Monica (I rest my case that the '90s historically were uneventful and boring), 9/11 and the War in Iraq, and for many the immigration problem. But has the nation changed substantially? Not that I can see.

There are three factors that engender major change in the U.S.—wars, technology, and business entrepreneurialism. Technological and business developments are ongoing and constant. Technological changes can profoundly affect our lives and life styles, such as the auto, telegraph, telephone, radio and television, and now the Internet. But have they changed the country basically? I don't think so.

And one obvious problem of trying to predict the impact of technology is that it never seems to work the way we think it will. Few creators of the Internet had any idea that it would become what it is—and God knows what it is going to become—and many of the pioneers that I talked to 10 years ago thought it would be terrible and were vowing to head it off. In the news business lots of Cassandras predicted that radio and then television and then the computer would be the end of newspapers and were dead wrong. We don't know what the endgame of the Internet will be. It is having far more impact on newspapers than radio and TV news did because it competes for audience and advertising and is weakening them (and television news) but will it destroy them? No. When I went to the Post in 1981 I sat in on sales pitches by various information services, some of whom predicted a paperless society within 15 years and said that their primary technological problem was to develop a minicomputer that would be as handy to carry and read on the subway or in the bathroom as the dead and departed newspaper. The computer, in fact, has generated more paperwork than ever; the biggest selling computer peripheral is the printer.

Wars and crisis have prompted the most profound changes in America, beginning of course with the Revolution. In the Civil War, developments in mass manufacturing and the use of railroads and the telegraph stored up an economic energy that exploded in 1865 and, along with industrialization and urbanization, made the 50 years between Appomattox and Sarajevo the most revolutionary in our history. The same happened to a lesser degree in World War I, with the boom of the '20s, and to an enormous degree after World War II. The postwar boom fueled by the great buildup of manufacturing capacity and consumer demand (and the intellectual energy and creativity engendered by the G.I. Bill of Rights) was the longest and most profound in our history. The Vietnam War had a negative effect. We didn't really mobilize for it (as we haven't for Iraq) and it badly divided us socially, by race and class.

The one non-war crisis that had a great impact was the Great Depression. In a way it may have wrought more profound changes than war. It changed our attitude toward government, bringing us into the welfare state; the U.S. was the last western industrial country to adopt the three basics of the welfare state—old-age retirement and medical insurance and workmen's compensation. (The first to do so was Wilhelmine Germany after it uni-

fied in the late 19th Century under Bismarck and the Kaiser.) It also brought us the longest political realignment in our history, the infrequently broken Democratic majority of 1933 to 1995.

When I think of the one 20-year period that saw the most change in Americans' attitudes toward themselves and the world I think it would be 1929 to 1949. On the eve of the Depression we were bullish, unrealistically confident in our economy, and to a great extent provincially isolationist and in denial about our growing role as a world power. The strength of the isolationists, while understandable given their revulsion against the criminal mass slaughter of WWI, was extremely damaging leading into WWII. By 1949 we had come to terms with our world power status, vide the Marshall Plan and NATO, but were still haunted by memories of the Depression, which was a major factor in Truman's 1948 election. In that 20-year period we had weathered two of the three great post-Revolutionary/Constitutional Era crises of our history, so no wonder it had a major impact on us.

Twenty years from now who knows? Who knows what wars we'll have been in by then? I can be pessimistic about our prospects for reforming health care, energy, and environmental protection because of the public's passivity toward the huge economic interests that impede them; I'm a New Deal Democrat because I think government is needed to referee between we the people and the powerful economic interests who exert so much control over us. When I was a boy growing up in wheat-farming families in Kansas I had a great-uncle, Charlie, who was a great character. We had bet on the Dodgers-Yankees series and he asked why I bet on the Yankees. Because they win, I responded (I also bet, we're talking quarters and half-dollars here, on Joe Louis). "Boy," he said, "there are four things in this world you can never trust: the bankers, the railroads, the millers, and the New York Yankees." I've rooted against the Yanks ever since. And we can substitute the health care and oil industries and huge communications conglomerates for the old trusts of steel, railroads, and banking of 100 years ago.