



VOICE

The United States Will Be Shocked by Its Future

The only thing that's clear about the changing world order is that Americans can shape their role in it—and that they're likely to mess it up.

By [Stephen M. Walt](#) | April 16, 2019, 11:56 AM



A fortune-telling fairground attraction bearing the likeness of Donald Trump stands at Washington Square Park in New York on Oct. 14, 2016.

(Timothy A. Clary/AFP/Getty Images)

As a species, we seem to be in a period of considerable uncertainty, where familiar features of the political landscape are disappearing, and it is not clear what will replace them. Will NATO and the European Union be around in five

or 10 years, and in anything like their present form? Will the United States still be fighting shadowy opponents in distant lands? Is China destined to dominate Asia, and maybe the world? Will artificial intelligence sweep away jobs in sector after sector of the economy? How much of the planet will be underwater or uninhabitable due to climate change, and how many millions of people will be seeking refuge from war, crime, oppression, corruption, or environmental degradation? Are the dysfunctions afflicting many wealthy democracies a momentary blip or the beginning of a slide into dictatorship?

I could go on, but you get the idea. Prediction is always hard, of course, especially about the future, but there was a time when many people thought they knew exactly where we were headed. Back in the early 1990s, plenty of American pundits, professors, and politicians were confident they knew what the future held, and many of them were pretty optimistic about it. People like [Samuel Huntington](#) and [Robert Kaplan](#) saw dark days ahead, but scholars like [Francis Fukuyama](#), journalists like [Thomas Friedman](#), and politicians like Bill Clinton believed a shiny new globalized world of liberal democratic capitalism was dawning and would render old-style power politics obsolete.

At moments like the present, it may be helpful to step back and remind ourselves of just how much the world has really changed—and how much it hasn't. If you go back a mere 500 years, which amounts to a blip in human history, the idea of a single unified global system was effectively unknown. Europeans were just figuring out that North and South America existed, and most people were completely unaware that *Homo sapiens* lived all over the world. All politics really was local back then. Economic growth worldwide had been exceedingly modest for centuries, and there were only 500 million people on the entire planet (compared to nearly 8 billion today).

Roughly 200 years ago, China was one-third of the world economy, all of Europe together was about 25 percent, and the United States was inconsequential: a mere 2 percent. Then Europe took off—fueled by the Industrial Revolution—and by 1900 it was 40 percent of the world economy and home to the world's strongest military powers. China's share had fallen to around 10 percent, and the United States was busily expanding across North America and growing so rapidly that it had become the world's largest economy (and a legitimate great power) in just a century. Japan had taken off, too, following the Meiji Restoration, and it was beginning to throw its weight around in Asia.

Then what happened? The great powers of Europe fought two horrific World Wars. The United States entered both of them late, suffered the least damage, and emerged

the world's most powerful country by a considerable margin. The Soviet Union had become a modern industrial and military power too—though its economy still trailed America's by a lot—and from 1945 to 1989 the two continent-sized superpowers waged a relentless global Cold War that cost trillions of dollars and killed millions of people in proxy wars. The United States and its alliance system proved to be stronger and more resilient than the Warsaw Pact, however, and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed in at the end of 1991. U.S. leaders woke up to find themselves “at the height of power” with “the rarest opportunity to shape the world ... for the benefit of not just the United States but all nations,” as former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft [wrote](#) of the experience. And that's exactly what they have tried to do ever since, [albeit not very successfully](#).

Two other developments are worth highlighting. The first: After Mao Zedong died in 1976, his successors abandoned most of his principles and embraced the market, and China took off. It is now the world's No. 2 economy and America's only possible peer competitor.

The second: It turned out we humans were having an enormous impact on the global environment, including a potentially irreversible and destructive rise in average global temperature. And according to the [WWF](#), global populations of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians have declined on average by 60 percent (!) since 1970, mostly due to human activity.

My point is that the past 500 years have seen enormous shifts in the balance of wealth and power around the world, together with significant changes in political attitudes and the environment in which we all live. And many of these changes were wholly unexpected.

As I noted in a [previous column](#), the world of 1978 (my second year in graduate school) was vastly different than the world we live in today. There were two Germanys, the Warsaw Pact was intact, and it was the Soviet Union—not the United States—that was entering a quagmire in Afghanistan. North Korea and Pakistan had no nuclear weapons, but the United States and Soviet Union together [had more than 50,000](#). The United Kingdom had joined the European Union six years prior, and every European country had its own currency and border controls. Gay sex was illegal in many countries, and gay people couldn't marry *anywhere*. The Japanese economy was growing like gangbusters, and Harvard University professors were writing books with titles like [Japan as No. 1](#). The United States had more than 200,000 troops in Europe and hardly any in the Middle East. South Africa had an apartheid regime, nobody had any idea that climate change was occurring, and there were no personal computers, cell

phones, internet, Spotify, Facebook, email, or even compact discs. It cost so much to dial long distance in the United States that one often waited till after 11 p.m. to take advantage of lower rates. If you traveled abroad, you stayed in touch with friends and family not on Facebook or Facetime or Skype but by writing letters. On paper. You could smoke on airplanes, in restaurants, and inside most public buildings, but smoking pot anywhere in the United States could land you in jail. Security screening at airports was minimal. There were only three television networks in the United States (plus public TV), and *Saturday Night Live* was fresh and funny. There were 18 women in the House of Representatives (out of 435 members) and only three in the Senate, two of whom were widows appointed to fill out their deceased husbands' terms.

I draw two big lessons from these reflections. First, a lot can change in a heck of a hurry. There may be plenty of recurring behaviors in world politics—nations rise and fall, balances form, wars are fought and won, etc.—but understanding global politics today consists mostly of figuring out how novel features and the familiar elements combine.

Second, I'm struck by the degree to which change, especially the rise or fall of different countries, is shaped not by anonymous social forces but by specific acts of political choice. Big structural features such as population and geography do matter, of course, but the fate of nations has often been determined as much or more by the choices they make. The European great powers hastened their decline by fighting self-destructive wars, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Venezuela's election of President Hugo Chávez, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom were all enormous self-inflicted wounds that were far from inevitable. Such follies remind us that things can go south in a hurry, even for those who are favorably situated.

For Americans, the good news is that their country is still powerful, wealthy, and [remarkably secure](#). The bad news is that U.S. society is increasingly polarized, its political institutions are not working well, and economic inequality is at record levels. When the normally pro-American *Economist* magazine's annual [Democracy Index](#) downgrades the United States from a "full" to a "flawed" democracy, it's time to start worrying.

Why is that a problem? Because the number of problems we need to address is growing and at an increasingly rapid rate. Even with the best of intentions and a lot of hard work, issues such as climate change, refugees, changing labor markets, soaring deficits, violent extremists, privacy, shifting balances of power, etc. may outstrip our capacity to come up with workable solutions. Just look at how much trouble U.S. President Donald Trump is having coming up with a halfway decent policy on

immigration, which was one of his signature issues during the 2016 campaign. That's partly because Trump is a terrible manager and his advisors appear to be mostly incompetent hacks, but it's not like Trump's predecessors did a lot better on this issue.

Paradoxically, addressing problems such as these successfully will require paying less attention to conditions abroad and more attention to domestic institutions. Instead of devoting endless hours and countless billions of dollars trying to determine the local politics of distant lands that the United States does not understand—even after nearly two decades of trying—Americans should focus more of their political energies on making their political institutions more representative, less skewed in favor of wealthy interests, and more capable of decisive action. It also means recognizing that government has an important role to play, and doing more to recruit exceptionally talented people to government service.

Perhaps the nearest analogy to America's current situation is the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era that it spawned. At the beginning of the 20th century, Americans also faced the challenges of vast inequality, a political order that was deeply corrupt, millions of new immigrants seeking a new life in the United States, and significant disagreement about the role the country should play on the world stage. The Progressive Era was also a moment of great political energy, when reformers gradually gained political power and created many of the institutions that got the country through the 20th century. One can see analogues today in proposals for a Green New Deal or the [For the People Act of 2019](#), which contains various measures intended to improve U.S. electoral institutions.

Whatever the specific merits of these proposals, their emergence today is a hopeful sign. Whether it is enough, however, remains to be seen.

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