

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
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Friday, May 2, 2003

## A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED JULY 2, 1997

### THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

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I have been asked numerous times lately whether I plan to write an article recommending a "summer reading list." The answer is no. I wrote a piece a little over a year ago entitled "Summer Reading Season Is Just Ahead," in which I recommended, and briefly discussed, 25 books that I think are very special. I don't see how I can improve much on that list. So I won't try, except for one addition that I realized recently should have been included. This is Cicero's *De Officiis*.

This book, which despite its rather imposing title is a short, easy read, is one of the most remarkable and influential volumes in Western literature. Voltaire described it as follows, in a "note to Cicero" 1800 years after the great Roman orator's death: "No one will ever write anything more wise, more true, or more useful. From now on, those whose ambition it is to give men instruction, to provide them with precepts, will be charlatans if they want to rise above you, or will all be your imitators."

The book is a manual of ethics and moral philosophy written to Cicero's son Marcus, who was studying in Athens at the time. It is a timeless reminder, studded with fascinating and practical examples, that "the morally wrong can never be advantageous even when it enables you to make some gain that you believe to be to your advantage. The mere act of believing that some wrongful course of action constitutes an advantage is pernicious."

"Surely," Cicero tells his son, "the reputation and the glory of being a good man are too precious to be sacrificed in favour of anything at all, however valuable and desirable in appearance. No so-called advantage can possibly compensate for the elimination of your good faith and decency and the consequent destruction of your good name. For if a human exterior conceals the savage heart of a wild beast, their possessor might as well be beast instead of man."

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I was reminded of the omission of this worthy treatise from my recommended book list when I read somewhere recently that Bill Clinton keeps a copy of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* on the nightstand beside his bed. I am a great fan of *Meditations* also. Indeed, I included it the above-mentioned list of 25 "must reads." And while I don't keep it next to my bed, I do, in fact, browse through it occasionally, and have given out numerous copies to friends and relatives, including my parents.

Anyway, I couldn't help thinking that *Meditations* was an odd choice of bedtime reflection for someone who is, by all accounts, as dedicated an Epicurean as Bill Clinton. And I couldn't help but think that if he had chosen *De Officiis* as his nocturnal character builder, he might not need to consult on so regular a basis the thoughts of the great stoic Marcus Aurelius on how to gird oneself to face with courage life's many trials and tribulations. Read it this summer. See if I'm not right about this. Buy an extra copy and send it to the White House.

Anyway, I am offering the same reading list this summer as I did in that piece published a year ago February, with the exception of adding Cicero, whose influence upon the history of European literature and ideas, according to the introduction in my Penguin Classics paperback, *Cicero, Selected Works*, "greatly exceeds that of any other prose writer in any language."

This does not mean, however, that I won't occasionally recommend or comment on a book that has caught my fancy, or that of my colleague Steve Soukup. One such recent example is Robert Kaplan's *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy*, which Steve and I thought we would discuss briefly this week, given the troubles that appear to be brewing in the Middle East and the anarchy that is already taking place in West Africa.

At first glance, it seems unlikely that *The Ends of the Earth* would add anything very significant to the study of geopolitics and comparative government, since it is basically a travelogue compiled by a journalist visiting the slums of a number of exotic locales from West Africa to the Nile river valley; from Turkey to Iran to former Soviet Central Asia; from Pakistan to India to Thailand, Cambodia, and finally to Vietnam.

However, Kaplan's book not only documents the decay of many of the world's oldest civilizations, but it also offers some explanation as to why this disintegration is occurring. More importantly, we believe, it compels readers to rethink their beliefs about what might lie ahead in this post-cold war era, and in doing so, it shoots some pretty large holes in Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington's widely discussed theory that the 21st century will be marked by a "clash of civilizations."

Huntington's thesis, which first appeared in the Summer, 1993 *Foreign Affairs* (and which I outlined in a February, 1995 piece entitled "The West V. The Confucian-Islamic Connection"), has become the paradigm around which most mainstream geopolitical gurus now formulate their macro theses on where the world is headed. In short, it has become to post-cold war foreign policy discussion what George Kennan's so-called X-paper, outlining the cold war strategy of "containment," was from its publication in 1947 until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Huntington's views are complex and can't be given full justice in a short article such as this. But here's part of the way I outlined them in the above-mentioned piece.

“Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations,” he says. He notes that for 150 years after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the conflicts of the Western world were largely among “princes,” who were attempting to expand their power bases. In the process, he says, they created nation states, and beginning with the French Revolution, the principle lines of conflict were between nations rather than princes.

This 19th century pattern lasted, he says, until the end of W.W.I, when, as a result of the Russian revolution and the reaction against it, the conflict of nations yielded to the conflict of ideologies: communism, fascism and liberal democracy. During the Cold War, Huntington says, “this conflict became embodied in the struggle between the two superpowers, neither of which was a nation state in the classical European sense and each of which defined its identity in terms of ideology.”

With the end of the cold war, he says, “international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its centerpiece becomes the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations.” Under these conditions, “the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history.”

Simply stated, Huntington says that the “most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines” between eight “civilization groups:” Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African. He notes that, among other things, these civilizations have different views on the “relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.”

Kaplan, whose book is the outgrowth of his groundbreaking article “The Coming Anarchy” in the February, 1994 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, doesn’t argue that Huntington is completely wrong. Instead, he brings to the table some of the views of other geopolitical observers who he obviously admires, and most importantly, observations from his own visits to some of the worst neighborhoods in the “third world.”

One point he makes is that Huntington too readily dismisses the forces of nationalism and ethnic dissent. He suggests that there is so much intra-cultural discontent in the majority of Huntington’s eight civilization groups that none are likely to come together to launch inter-cultural wars in a way envisioned by Huntington.

“The Clash of Civilizations” is a romantic term, Kaplan says, “conjuring up massive armies divided by race, language, and religion, advancing across battlefields thousands of miles long, wielding banners of the cross and of the crescent.” As a “crude organizing principle” it is an appropriate term, he says, but “the reality is uglier, more complex, and pathetic.” He says we

should "forget about medieval horsemen giving battle; expect instead a fistfight with smashed vodka bottles in a plywood bar."

In support of this contention, Kaplan cites, among others, Fouad Ajami, a professor at Johns Hopkins and a Lebanese-born Shi'ite, who argues that Huntington's cultural plate tectonics are too simple. He puts it this way: "The world of Islam divides and subdivides. The battle lines in the Caucasus . . . are not coextensive with civilizational fault lines. The lines follow interests of states. Where Huntington sees a civilizational duel between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Iranian state has cast religious zeal . . . to the wind . . . in that battle the Iranians have tilted toward Christian Armenia."

If Kaplan stopped here, his book wouldn't add all that much to Huntington's thesis. Even I can figure out that there are humungous and deep seated disputes within most of Huntington's civilization groups that are likely to prevent a joining of forces of the kind discussed by Huntington.

Indeed, Steve and I wrote a piece in early June, called "Israel's Not the Key to a Better Middle East Future", in which we argued that "the Muslim nations of the Middle East and North Africa hate each other every bit as much as they hate Jews. In this regard, it is worth remembering, we believe, that the last two major wars over there resulted from an Iraqi attack against its Arab neighbors, and an Iraqi attack against its Persian neighbors."

But Kaplan picks up, and greatly expands upon another point we made in that article; that being that the aggravations within these cultural groups are not even themselves culturally driven, but are, to a very large degree, the result of tribal hatreds, extraordinary population growth, a cultural resistance to reasonable economic policies, and extreme environmental folly, including the misuse of scarce water resources. Kaplan calls it "demographic, environmental and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger."

Kaplan discusses these problems in the Middle East and elsewhere at some length. But he says that Africa provides the best glimpse of where all of this ultimately leads. It is in Africa, he says, that these stresses have reached a sort of perverse crescendo. Thus, it is Africa, he says, that must be studied if one wants a peak into the future of the rest of the third world.

Kaplan doesn't argue that every poor country will experience exactly what is happening in Africa. But he carefully builds the case, supported by own observations, that variations of what is going on there are occurring virtually everywhere, most especially in those places with the most rapid population growth, including he says, China, India, and of course, the Middle East.

Specifically, what he found in Africa was "disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels."

Space does not permit even a limited look at the horrors Kaplan encountered in Africa. But a couple paragraphs from the above-mentioned *Atlantic Monthly* article provide some idea.

I got a general sense of the future while driving from the airport to downtown Conakry, the capital of Guinea. The forty-five minute journey in heavy traffic was through one never-ending shantytown: a nightmarish Dickensian spectacle to which Dickens himself would never have given credence. The corrugated metal shacks and scabrous walls were coated with black slime. Stores were built out of rusted shipping containers, junked cars, and jumbles of wire mesh. The streets were one long puddle of floating garbage. Mosquitoes and flies were everywhere. Children, many of whom had protruding bellies, seemed as numerous as ants. When the tide went out, dead rats and the skeletons of cars were exposed on the mucky beach. In twenty-eight years Guinea's population will double if growth goes on at current rates. Hardwood logging continues at a madcap speed, and people flee the Guinean countryside for Conakry. It seemed to me that here, as elsewhere in Africa and the Third World, man is challenging nature far beyond its limits, and nature is now beginning to take its revenge.

Of the approximately 12 million people worldwide whose blood is HIV-positive, 8 million are in Africa. In the capital of the Ivory Coast, whose modern road system only helps to spread the disease, 10% of the population is HIV-positive. And war and refugee movements help the virus break through to more-remote areas of Africa. Alan Greenberg, M.D., a representative of the Centers for Disease Control in Abidjan, explains that in Africa the HIV virus and tuberculosis are now "fast-forwarding each other." Of the approximately 4,000 newly diagnosed tuberculosis patients in Abidjan, 45% were also found to be HIV-positive. As African birth rates soar and slums proliferate, some experts worry that viral mutations and hybridizations might, just conceivably, result in a form of the AIDS virus that is easier to catch than the present strain.

Stephen Capelli of the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Threat Analysis describes Kaplan's picture thus:

[He] paints a bleak picture of the . . . Third World by exposing the destructive influences of overpopulation, violent crime, infectious disease, vast environmental degradation, dwindling resources and rising ethnic hatred that plague these nations. In this macabre world, unemployed young men form roving street gangs control poverty stricken neighborhoods through intimidation and violence. And what once was tranquil farmland is now a 'no-man's' land between cities that are themselves overflowing with thousands of refugees who each year flee a countryside ravaged by man-made environmental hazards. In addition, new trade routes, which resemble the 'silk roads' of old, are sprouting up between these decaying citadels, facilitating trade while also spreading deadly contagious diseases like AIDS and TB.

One of the most interesting points Kaplan makes, we believe, is that environmental degradation lies at the heart of all of these devastating trends. Now, we know that whenever that phrase is brought up nowadays, conservatives roll their eyes. But Kaplan, and one his chief sources of information on this trend, Thomas Homer-Dixon, the head of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of Toronto, are not raging against outdoor barbeques and the internal combustion engine, like Al Gore. Nor are they political gadflies trying to win favor with the

wine and brie set. They are serious observers of the consequences of massive environmental negligence on specific population groups.

In third-world country after third-world country, including China and India, Kaplan documents and discusses the kind of massive soil degradation and deforestation, disastrous water policies, and horrendous air pollution problems that make it highly unlikely that these countries can achieve the kind of economic growth, and political stability, that will be necessary to support their exploding populations. In his *Atlantic Monthly* piece, he put it this way.

"It is time to understand 'the environment' for what it is: the national-security issue of the early 21st century. The political and strategic impact of surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution, and, possibly, rising sea levels in critical, overcrowded regions like the Nile Delta and Bangladesh--developments that will prompt mass migrations, and, in turn, incite group conflicts--will be the core foreign-policy challenge from which most others will ultimately emanate, arousing the public and uniting assorted interests left over from the Cold War. In the 21st century water will be in dangerously short supply in such diverse locales as Saudi Arabia, Central Asia, and the southwestern United States. A war could erupt between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile River water. Even in Europe tensions have arisen between Hungary and Slovakia over the damming of the Danube, a classic case of how environmental disputes fuse with ethnic and historical ones."

Kaplan admits that such Malthusian-like forecasts have, in the past, been negated by remarkable technological advances and human ingenuity. But, he points out, human ingenuity is not evenly distributed. "Moreover," he says, "technical ingenuity depends on social ingenuity--the ability to create a functioning society: What good are new Western vaccines in an anarchic African country where health clinics are constantly being vandalized or having the ir electricity cut? He continues:

Deficient social ingenuity is, of course, partly the result of resource scarcity, which further aggravates rivalries within a society. Therefore the ability of a policymaker--even one as gifted as Nelson Mandela--to be a good social engineer may decline in the face of South Africa's 2.63% annual population growth and diminishing soil and water resources. The same, obviously, goes for China and India and their leaders.

Kaplan says he thinks we are entering a "bifurcated world," part of which will be healthy and well fed, and pampered by technology, where the people live in cities and suburbs in which the environment has been mastered and ethnic animosities have been quelled by bourgeois prosperity. The other, larger part, he says, will be condemned to a life that is Hobbesian, "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." People there, he says, "will live in shantytowns where attempts to rise above poverty, cultural dysfunction, and ethnic strife will be doomed by a lack of water to drink, soil to till, and space to survive in."

In this latter world, Kaplan says, "environmental stress will present people with a choice that is increasingly among totalitarianism (as in Iraq), fascist-tending mini-states (as in Serb-held Bosnia), and road-warrior cultures (as in Somalia)."

Kaplan does not say so specifically, but it is worth keeping as mind while contemplating the world he envisions, that the "good life" he projects for the developed world depends in very large part on many of the natural resources contained in the "other world."

It is also worth noting, in closing, that the forces of irredentism are undoubtedly as strong, if not stronger, within Western culture as anywhere else in the world. One need only look around at some of this country's closest allies and nearest neighbors to see how, in Kaplan's words, "the increasing erosion of nation states" has taken its toll in the First World as well.

For example, while many observers blame the defeat of the Tories in the recent British elections on their opposition to the pending unification of Europe, things are not quite so simple.

The Tories won zero, that's Z-E-R-O seats in Wales and Scotland, in part because they continued to maintain strong opposition to the devolution of power from London to Edinburgh and Cardiff. Labour, on the other hand, "looks with favor on" such devolution. And so, even as Labour makes overtures indicating its willingness to accept the new unified European currency, the very state of Britain, which dates from 1707, is coming apart at the seams. How can Britain unify with Europe if there is no Britain?

All of this is, of course, in addition to the centuries old problems in Northern Ireland, where not only do the Irish hate the British, but hate each other as well. If ever there was intra-cultural conflict, the Catholic/Protestant battle for Ulster has to take top billing.

The French are notoriously romantic, but we doubt that even they aren't romantic enough to believe that their millennia-old adversarial relationship with Germany can simply be swept under the rug in pursuit of "the United States of Europe." In fact, the recent resurgence of the Socialist Party in French politics can be attributed to but one cause, fear of greater European unity.

Not only are the French wary of their neighbors to the East, but the demands imposed by the German government upon nations wishing to qualify for participation in the unified currency scheme led to the imposition of austere economic measures by France's ruling Conservative Party; this, in turn, led to the Conservative's crushing defeat in the recent elections. If the results of this election tell us anything, it is that as the Euro and the greater European unity inherent in its adoption draw nearer, the French people are starting to get cold feet.

Within the next year, Canada will know if it is to become two countries or remain one, at least temporarily. During the next year the secessionist opposition party, the *Bloc Quebecois*, will hold a third referendum to decide Quebec's fate. The French-speaking *Quebecois* have kicked up enough dirt to make the secession of the province seem possible if not likely.

To make matters worse for Canadians, the recent national elections demonstrated that there is clearly no national consensus as to the direction in which the nation should be steered, even without factoring in Quebec's dissent. Columnist Paul Craig Roberts writes, "Canada has emerged from . . . [the] election as three separate political jurisdictions. Quebec represented by The Bloc, Western Canada represented by the Reform Party, and Ontario represented by the Liberal Party, once a national party."

To a lesser degree, Italy and Spain also share the worries of Canada and Great Britain. Separatists in northern Italy seek to undo the work of Garibaldi's *Risorgimento*, and re-divide Italy into a northern state (undoubtedly to maintain the name of Italy) and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the South. Likewise, the Basque population of Spain would prefer to have their "home rule" replaced by national independence.

Of course, the natural reaction to all of this intra-cultural, ethnic, nationalist nastiness is for Americans to pat themselves on the back for having created the long-revered melting-pot that prevents such political atrocities from occurring here. It might be assumed that while the rest of the world deals with intra-cultural conflict, the U.S., having fought its Civil War over 100 years ago and, thus, free of such secessionist or intra-nationalist activity, would thrive while the rest of the world falls apart. This assumption, however, is not true.

The proverbial melting pot may at one time have been an appropriate metaphor for the assimilation of many different ethnicities into a uniquely American culture. But it is no more. In an ironic twist that is itself uniquely American, the stagnation of assimilation and the collapse of the melting pot have left the nation searching for its soul.

It is fitting that the circle has been completed. Kaplan leads the attack on Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations; however, Huntington's paradigm plays well in the American theater. In a uniquely American way, the conflict in the United States, though intra-national, is, nonetheless inter-cultural. Think about while you read "The Ends of the Earth." And don't forget to send Bill a copy of *De Officiis*.

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