A Sense of the Tragic:
Developmental Dangers in the Twenty-first Century

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August 2001
Series edited by
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Geography and National Security
U.S. Naval War College

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A SENSE OF THE TRAGIC:
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ROBERT D. KAPLAN

IF I WERE STANDING BEFORE YOU, SAY A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, AND we had to figure out what the twentieth century would be like, from the point of view of 1900, it would be very hard to do so because three words would not have existed in common or perhaps would not have been in most dictionaries at the time—inflation, totalitarianism, and fascism.

These terms were simply unknown, not used a hundred years ago. By comparison, we may not even have terms yet for the kind of problems we’re going to face in forty or fifty years because those words—inflation, fascism, and totalitarianism—came from a mixture that we are witnessing only now of old and ongoing ideologies and the new technology of the industrial revolution. I would prefer to be a bit less ambitious, however, and look ahead just ten years or fifteen years. Thus, while I will address technology and how it differs from its influence during the industrial revolution, I am not predicting the future. At best, all one can do is look at the past long enough and in enough detail so that the future is somewhat less surprising than it would ordinarily be.

But it remains useful to look at the past—the twentieth century—to see what we might learn about the next ten or fifteen years. If I had only one or two sentences to define the problems—the foreign policy problems, the strategic problems of the twentieth century—how would I do it? Here is what I would offer: The problem with the twentieth century was the way that liberalizing ideals and utopian ideals chain reacted with the industrial revolution to produce incredibly bad ideologies in a number of states.

Why do I focus on ideals that came about in the liberalizing context? Why do I use the word “utopian”? Because Nazism and Communism are essentially utopian philosophies. They believe in a perfect future—a future that would be much better than the
present. These philosophies also have a road map to “get there.” But because people disagreed with that future, it required both repression and dominance to carry out.

Hitler came to power in a free and fair democratic election. True, he was a minority candidate and did not receive the majority of the vote. But this process is remarkably similar to the way elections are carried out in many new democracies today. The Bolsheviks also came to power amid a broad liberalizing upheaval after a decade when people talked freely against the czar and the system of order. People were discussing politics more than they had been in the past. Again, in looking at these past examples, I could be describing any number of new democracies in the world today.

So here is the grist of the problem we face. It is that it is not poverty that leads to unrest—to revolutions through American foreign policy problems. It is development. It is economic development of the kind seen throughout the world that puts one country after another—India, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia, Kenya—into a situation, into a level of modernization, vaguely similar to that of Germany and Russia in the early part of the twentieth century, societies coming out of autocracy, with larger and larger parts of the population becoming politicized or entering into the political fray through labor movements and political movements. Yet often the institutions are not quite enough to sustain a rapidly developing society; often the “new” society is more dynamic than the creaky, old-fashioned government institutions that had governed such societies previously. The institutions, in short, could not keep pace with the dynamic change taking place. In such places we witness upheavals of one sort or another.

In the 1990s, for example, we saw the beginning of the crackup of the colonial gridwork of states that had organized political development in Africa, in large parts of Asia, and in much of South America. Granted, one could write volumes on the faults of the European colonialists, but one thing they perhaps did well is take large tracts of the earth and divided them up—perhaps unfairly, perhaps not intelligently, perhaps not according to tribal and ethnic lines. But they created an organized division of states that lasted for many decades after the last European colonialist left
Africa. In the 1990s, however, we saw the fraying of that state system, in which the system itself became a gridwork of many states.

In the beginning of that decade, this process began in places that were somewhat marginal, with small populations, and which were not regional powers: Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Haiti.

And yet because these places started to crumble just as the United States was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom and a sense of triumphalism from the end of the Cold War and our victory in it, there came about the phenomenon of humanitarian intervention, or rather the debate about humanitarian intervention. In short, we were facing societies that were small enough so that a military alternative was credible. (One could argue, though, whether or not such an alternative was truly credible.) Further, we had a sense of well-being, that with no great threats “out there” we could devote our foreign policy energies to good works at will.

This debate became possible because of two factors came together in the 1990s: a sense of economic well-being, and ideological triumphalism from the end of the Cold War. I fear, however, that this debate will become part of the past, because we will see the further crackup, the further decay of this postcolonial gridwork of states in larger, more complex, more urbanized societies. There will be no possible intervention scenarios for places such as Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Pakistan, or Kenya, and this decay will occur at a time when the United States does not quite feel the same sense of economic uplift, well-being, and triumphalism.

Why do I believe that because small societies that used to be part of the colonial gridwork of states, decayed and fell apart, larger states might go through a similar process? Or that, if such larger states do not collapse, they might weaken so significantly as to result in violent political turmoil and significant human-rights violations in ethnic classes? There are several reasons for such possible outcomes.

First, before I go farther, let me divide this topic in two ways. There are two issues here that people think of as goods in and of themselves but that I think of as value-neutral. These issues are neither good nor bad; it simply depends upon the circumstances
on which they are applied. Those two “goods” are democracy on one hand and technological development.

My argument is that democracy and technological development are not “goods”; they are not “bads,” either. They are just neutrals. They can make a situation better or worse, depending upon where they are applied.

But before we deal with these issues in any further depth, we must consider other factors that might cause disintegration in larger states. One factor, of course, is population growth. In truth, there exists a basic confusion about population theory. While it remains true, as optimists say, that the rate at which world population is growing is in decline—and that the world population in fifty years or so will be much older—that truth does not take into account the thirty or so countries that are significant candidates for unrest, to be American foreign policy challenges. When we look at these countries over a shorter span of time, we find that the rates at which their populations are growing are coming down so slowly that in absolute numbers, they are still going up. More significantly, they also have what we call youth “bulges.”

Why would this phenomenon be significant? We see political unrest, violence in Indonesia, the West Bank, sub-Saharan Africa; what common factor exists? All the political violence is committed by young men, usually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine. Further, in the countries that are most unstable and that are most worrisome to us, the proportions of the population that is male and within this age spectrum will go up rather than go down over the next ten or fifteen years. It will go up the most in the West Bank, Gaza, Zambia, Kenya, Cote d’Ivoire, Pakistan, Indonesia—all places that are already on the brink. In a number of these places, there will not be enough jobs or educational opportunities to sustain or provide an outlet for these young men. Population, then, is one factor.

Another factor leading to instability in many states is the process of urbanization. Urban societies, after all, are harder to govern than rural societies. Urban societies require a complex infrastructure of sewage, potable water, electricity, police, and street lights. Urban societies cannot grow their own food and are more
susceptible to food and commodity-price rises and falls. But the world, we know, is becoming increasingly urbanized.

The twenty-first century will be the first urban century. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, the most rural, underdeveloped area of the globe, almost 50 percent of the citizens live in urban surroundings. That figure will only increase as the years go on. So, if you’re a leader of a developing country in South Africa, in Guinea, in Indonesia, your margin of error will increase as well. Your margin of success will only narrow because you are dealing with a society with more and more young men, with no jobs and few opportunities, in increasingly urban concentrations in societies with declining water resources. Further, we know there will be rapid decline in the potable water supply in a large number of the most unstable countries.

Parts of India have experienced a drought in the last four years. Droughts in that part of the world do not only mean less water to drink, but, because dams generate electricity, less electricity for air conditioning. After getting accustomed to air conditioning in these poor, teeming third-world metropolises, people suddenly find it cut off. To wake up in the morning and not be able to turn on a water tap, flush a toilet, shower—after becoming used to it—day in and day out, and with no air conditioning, makes people angry and upset.

This is another factor. All these societies will have declining water availability. But all these issues are simply background noises. They do not create political tensions. They merely aggravate existing political tensions and make them harder to solve.

Finally, there is the issue of democracy. The problem with democracy is that it emerges best when it emerges last, as a capstone to all other kinds of political and social development in a society. Only in a society where most people can read, that has a sizeable middleclass that pays taxes, and reasonable institutions manned by literate bureaucrats, where people do not have to worry about being killed or attacked by their neighbors—that enjoys basic order—will democracy unleash all that is best in a society. Only then will democracy lead to more transparency, more honesty, higher growth rates.

We have witnessed this in Uruguay and Chile, in Taiwan and South Korea as well. Democracy is everywhere now, and
spreading. It seems unstoppable. We live in the age of democratization. It is present even in Sudan, where only 11 percent of women citizens know how to read. Democracy is spreading to places that have weak institutions, with unemployment and inflation rates every bit as high as in Germany in the early 1930s when Hitler came to power, and as in Italy in the 1920s when Mussolini came to power. This is the issue.

We have seen some problems already. In 1985, a coup in Sudan was preceded by the free and fairest democratic elections in the country’s history. They had been supported by the United States, by the United Nations. They had gone off without a hitch. Sudan was declared a democratic success story. The problem, however, was that very few people could read; there were no institutions; and there was a war going on in the south. Democracy led to an ineffectual government, to a vacuum of power and very shortly to the worst military tyranny in Sudan’s history.

It took the return of an autocrat in Azerbaijan to end a war that had been going on between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the early 1990s, despite democratization. Democratization was part of the process that led to genocide in Rwanda; the political parties formed in Rwanda, as part of the democratization process, simply institutionalized and hardened already existing ethnic tensions. Why did this happen? In a society like Rwanda, where almost everyone is poor, people have no legitimate way to align their political loyalties except by ethnicity, except by territory.

In a society such as ours and like many others that are well developed, there are many different classes. There are poor, lower-middle, middle-middle, upper-middle, rich. There are different labor federations, for different interests and kinds of representation. When we choose to be Democrats or Republicans, we accrue cross-cutting loyalties. These divisions are not lethal, like those of race or ethnicity or territory; democracy means division. It means fights. It means there will be consensus on one thing—the kind of government there is—but all else will be fought over. Nonetheless, a society requires stability, in terms of institutions, for democracy to flourish. When everyone belongs to the same (poor) group, political parties simply become masks for one ethnic group
or another. This was the problem in Rwanda, and elsewhere as well.

There are ironies here. Venezuela has been democratic since 1959 yet does not have much to show for it. Chile, by contrast, experienced a brutal military regime in the 1970s, but that regime provided the institutional base for such economic development in the 1980s that Chile has become the only economic tiger outside of Asia.

This is not an argument against democracy, but to say: despite democratization, do not expect the world of the next ten or fifteen years to be more stable. To the contrary, the world may become less stable precisely because of democratization. Consider the Middle East. We all believe a great deal has happened there in the last few decades; in economic and social terms, there has been tremendous development. Fifty years ago most Arabs and Persians lived in villages, were not literate, and had no access to the outside world or even to drinkable water. Now Middle Eastern societies are predominantly urban, with sizeable middle classes with ties to middle classes elsewhere in the world. These societies have become far more sophisticated. But in the political sense, there has been little development. Many Middle Eastern societies are still governed by the same one-man theocracies that existed forty or fifty years ago. Egypt has been run under military emergency rule since the mid-1950s.

What history shows is that ultimately political developments catch up with social and economic ones. The longer the lag, the more tumultuous the upheaval that brings them all together. It thus seems likely that the next generation of Arab autocrats will not be able to govern quite as autocratically as the present generation or the one just passing. Their rule will have to be freer, especially since, even now, half of all Arabs are under the age of fourteen. Young societies with dramatic youth “bulges” are coming up; they are going to demand more freedom. But there will not be the institutional development for stable democratic rule that one would expect or one would hope for.

What will we see then? We will likely witness many messy Mexico-style scenarios throughout the Middle East, from Morocco to Iran, but without two advantages Mexico had—a long border

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with the United States over which to export excess labor and Mexico’s institution-building tradition. Indeed, Mexico has a level of institutions even now that many states in the Middle East do not have.

We have lived with a true irony in the past few decades. Our officials promote democracy, but we rely on autocrats for peace and stability in the Middle East and for solving crises when they occur. The problem is that it remains easier to deal with one or a few people in an autocratic country than with forty of fifty politicians struggling for power in office, and ten or twenty lower or middle-level military officers and business oligarchs who all have to be brought into the decision-making process in a messy new democracy. But this is what we will have to deal with in coming years.

As an illustration, if Chairman Mao had been in power during the recent crises with China, there would have been only one person to deal with. But today we are dealing with a China that, though still light years away from democracy, is farther along the liberalizing path than it was ten or twenty years ago. We are dealing with a China that is governed by a corporate-style regime composed of military officers and top party officials. This regime, in reality, is more free. More people have been brought into the decision-making process.

This is how democracies emerge, just as they emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it makes it harder for us to solve crises when they occur, because we must now take into account internal power struggles. We remain unsure who has decision-making authority. This is what is will characterize many Arab countries in the future—Syria, Egypt, Jordan. We will deal with more people, because democracy is going to make the world, and the Middle East especially (during an error of youth “bulges” and chemical and biological weapons proliferation), more complex.

If democracy has problems, and one-man military dictatorships of the 1950s had obviously even worse problems, what are we likely to witness in this emerging security scenario? I would suggest that we will increasingly observe what I call “mixed regimes” or “hybrid regimes”—regimes that contain elements of both democracy and autocracy, each in its own original way. Even today, there are such
regime examples throughout the world. For a long time, the late King Hussein’s regime in Jordan was a mixed regime. He was officially an autocrat, but he always consulted with large groups of people. The parliament in Jordan was both very feisty and very well developed. Turkey, of course, is a mixed regime. Officially a democracy, the military holds tremendous sway and influence over the national security council. Bulgaria has been a mixed regime in a negative way, because criminal oligarchs now hold significant power despite a democratically elected parliament. Peru, for a while under Fujimori, was a mixed regime. China is emerging as kind of a mixed party-military dictatorship, though we are not quite sure what or how. Hong Kong did not simply shift from freedom to Communism; rather, it transformed to an oligarchy of roughly six real estate tycoons. The oligarchs deal with the government in Beijing.

Thus, we are likely to witness a wide range of regimes that may all call themselves democratic. We will go along with the lie for diplomatic purposes. But when one considers how their power relationships really work, one finds that such relationships are not very democratic after all. Thus, we must confront some final thoughts on the “problem” of democracy. Had Russia had another seven or ten years of Gorbachev’s capitalist-trending authoritarianism, Russia would be much easier to deal with today. The average Russian would probably live much better. There would be less instability. One of the reasons why China’s economy has developed so fast and the country has therefore become both a threat and a challenge is because it did not become a democracy. It remained a one-party state that opened up its economy first. We must not assume, therefore, that democracy is the last word in human political development.

As technology develops, as human societies develop, as maybe even regional city-states like São Paolo in Brazil or Catalonia in Spain become more significant than the nations around them, we may find that different types of ideologies begin to emerge. Further, there’s the issue of technology itself. As argued above, the problem with the twentieth century was the way the industrial revolution chain-reacted with utopian mass movements. Consider such reaction: Hitler, Stalin, and Mao could never have become
what they were without the industrial revolution as backdrop. Indeed, the tools of the industrial revolution gave them the wherewithal to conduct the most frightful human rights violations and other abuses against their own people.

The industrial revolution was about bigness. It was about big aircraft carriers, big tanks, big railway grids, big factories. We needed geographical space, therefore, to take advantage of what the industrial revolution had to offer. The industrial revolution had the effect of strengthening the power of central government; we saw the phenomena of the modern nation-states emerging. And because there were many new states around the world, it stood to reason that evil leaders might run a few of them. Without the industrial revolution, Nazism and Communism would simply have no meaning to us in the way in which they have meaning now.

But the post-industrial revolution is different. This will be a revolution about smallness. It will be about miniaturization and the defeat of matter, about gaining political power through a telephone jack, a laptop computer, and some plastic explosives that fit inside a pocket. Therefore, not only states but also nonstate actors, smaller disenfranchised groups of one sort or another will take advantage of how the post-industrial revolution magnifies their political power to influence people.

Let me offer one small example here. The United States of America has always had militia movements—the Whiskey Rebellion and Shay’s Rebellion both occurred during George Washington’s presidency. Radical militias, as such, are nothing new in U.S. history. What is new is the media and the use of chemical-fertilizer explosives. While militia movements may now be smaller than in the past (as a percentage of the population), their political importance is magnified, in part because of post-industrial technologies.

The world is going to become even more complex. The number of potential enemies and strategic challenges we will face will be greater, because the post-industrial revolution amplifies the power of even the smallest groups.

What, then, is the worst strategic nightmare the United States might have to face? It would be a chemical or biological version of Pearl Harbor. While only terrorists with state sponsorship may now be able to carry out such an attack, that may change as time
goes on. States may make strategic use of terrorists and organized crime groups in a way that is not possible now.

What will be the power of the United Nations, of global society? Perhaps we should recognize that a global power center is emerging and has emerged, not resident in the UN, but collectively in financial centers around the world that can reward or take money away from regimes in developing countries and thus effectively determine their domestic economic policies. Leaders of developing countries have to make their geographical space attractive to the world business community, because only it can bring the investment to build factories that dry up youth unemployment, which is what made their countries unstable to begin with.

The United Nations cannot do that. The United Nations is powerful only in the weakest countries. The United Nations was created by a post-World War II triumphalist fiat and may have signified a false dawn of the real globalization of the human community. The UN will either change radically and continually over the coming decades or else fade away as an instrument of real power—the ability to coerce, to force decisions upon other people. The UN’s power in this regard is minimal and unlikely to grow.

In summary, what we glimpse in this new century may seem unsolvable. But I would argue that this “new world” is really no different from the world at many other times in history; it simply has more of people and more complexity. But complexity adds difficulty. Thus, although stable democratic institutions are the best kind of institutions, developing them is the most destabilizing process imaginable. This transitional, destabilizing process leads us to the tragedy of history—to wars and upheavals. Precisely because of the economic growth of the last twelve years or so, we are seeing large numbers of dynamic countries developing where millions of people are leaving fatalistic existences in villages and migrating into cities, into sprawling urban landscapes, as low-paid laborers. While on a economist’s chart these places are a global success stories, they are now at the most unstable phases in their histories.

The next five or ten years are going to constitute a drumroll of foreign policy crises for American presidents. The way to deal with them is to cultivate deliberately a sense of the tragic. The American people have been optimists for 225 years, precisely because by
good fortune their institutions were founded on pessimism. The *Federalist Papers*, and the discussions at the constitutional convention make clear that the founding fathers—Madison and Hamilton, especially—always thought in terms of the worst-case scenario of the human condition. They assumed that men were creatures of passion, not rationality, and that therefore the job of government was to channel their passions toward positive ends. Because the founders thought tragically and pessimistically, their worst nightmares never came true.

The French revolutionaries, by contrast, were optimists. They believed in the power of intellectuals to engineer good results from the top. It led to the guillotine and to Napoleon’s dictatorship. If we deliberately cultivate a sense of the tragic, know our limits, and appreciate what can go wrong, much will *not* go wrong.