

## Michigan COMMENTARY

### Understanding the Mysterious Present

by Gerald A. Faverman, Ph.D., and David L. Kimball

After more than 200 years as a beacon of hope and optimism for the world, America now hunkers down, anticipating the future with foreboding. Not even military victory in Iraq and the abrupt collapse of Soviet communism have been able to dissipate a national fretfulness over the viability of our economy, social institutions, and system of government. Our pessimism extends beyond our own prospects: We fear that our children face an ever more menacing and unpromising future.

Our disquietude in the face of a world suddenly so unstable, unpredictable, and uncertain is understandable. We have seen ourselves as a society whose manifest destiny would dominate the world by moral example and spur its progress toward justice and democracy. The culmination of this ambition, attained in the American Century—a century dominated by American power, influence, and staggering wealth—brought us a success quite rare in the recorded history of empires and nation-states.

The “iron rule” in the rise and fall of societies is that their time of greatest peril comes at the acme of their success, because it is then that their willingness to struggle and sacrifice ebbs. Former governor George Romney recently observed, “No great nation has ever achieved plenty, comfort, and leisure and remained great.” Americans’ assumption that it should get easier as our power and influence grew ignored the historical evidence that in fact this attitude is the harbinger of inevitable decline.

The current political debate, both nationally and in Michigan, ignores—in its eagerness to avoid blame—the salient reality that the revolutionary changes we are living through affect every individual in every political subdivision of this globe. We live in a smaller world than ever before, and no group can be insulated from the activities of another. Moreover, our difficulty is more than the lingering grip of a recession that saps our souls as well as our prosperity. It is that we have entered a new age whose boundaries and definitions are yet unknown and whose consequences are impossible to predict. Such epochal transitions can be better understood by those looking back at them than by those living through them. As Søren Kierkegaard so aptly observed: “Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backwards.”

In the great tapestry of western civilization we have had four cultural episodes: the transition from hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists, the classical age’s establishment of philosophical and intellectual inquiry, the middle ages’ creation of an empire of faith, and—since the fifteenth century—the European deployment of science and technology to shape the world in its own image. This last chapter, which lasted for 600 years, is now coming to an end. The next chapter will encompass a world civilization, not only that of the West.

We are beginning a period of change that will take generations to coalesce, but one fact is clear: The new age will be characterized by scarcity. Our new world will be driven by the pragmatic requirement to manage shortage rather than abundance. For half a millennium we have believed ourselves immune from running out of resources. Eighteenth-century British economist Thomas Malthus postulated that populations increase faster than their means of subsistence and that famine and war result unless population growth is curtailed by moral restraint or natural disaster. Most westerners have lived with the confident assumption that agricultural abundance had proved Malthus wrong, but now faced with explosive population growth, a

shortage of water and arable land, and a decaying ecosystem, we fear that the Malthusian imperative could come true. In the generations ahead, the search for sustenance certainly will shape a new age.

Similarly, we have believed recently that Karl Marx's theory of class warfare leading to the revolution of the proletariat—a philosophy we erroneously called communism—was irrelevant to our culture and our future. The United States, however, now finds itself living on the cusp of massive social change in which the influence and size of the middle class declines as its members are redistributed between the rich and the poor at the extremes. Marx's vision of class warfare may be an unwelcome factor in the politics of the future whose manifestations we just are beginning to see at home as well as abroad.

Distrust of government is not peculiar to Michigan; we are seeing the profound alienation of the political middle in industrialized nations worldwide. While we are not apt to see a return in the short run to *lex talones*—"the law of the claw," the politics of polarity are becoming increasingly common. There seems to be political advantage in pitting one person against another, and all those who are different have reason to fear. In the end, the politics of polarity will continue until it ceases to be advantageous for its practitioners. Those who play to the prejudice and fear of the people currently have the floor. It is thus no surprise that Messrs. Buchanan and Duke, among others, find advantage in fishing in troubled waters.

With regard to social welfare, this nation seems headed for a period of social Darwinism, a version of survival of the fittest that propounds with great hyperbole the view that the poor and the weak are the cause of their own difficulty, thus absolving the majority from the requirement of preserving a sense of compassion. This philosophy spawns the policy of a less compassionate, less just society of which the old, the sick, the infirm, the handicapped, the different, and the disenfranchised are casualties. We make a grave mistake when we act as if charity and compassion are doomed in the societal restructuring ahead and that we are helpless to build a moral and caring society.

In the time ahead democratic institutions are at their greatest risk, and it is not inevitable that they will flourish or even survive. Democratic institutions typically have flourished in times of abundance and have been besieged in times of scarcity. In the face of increasing civil disorder worldwide, we need to be alert to the danger of Bonapartism. In volatile political climates, the military may be seen as a more effective source of social order than the fragmented aspirants for power and nationhood. America needs to be concerned that current friends and former enemies will face a challenge from their generals at our risk and peril.

In the new age, economic realities technology, communications, and competitiveness will encourage the evolution of new political structures, be they called confederacies, unions, common markets, or empires; it is clear that a European community and a North American community are in formation. A Pacific and a South American community, among others, likely will come to be.

Meanwhile, this global economic and political restructuring is forcing painful change in the way we manufacture, market, and distribute goods. Prosperity is at risk in every state and nation; industries can no longer be insulated by geography, regulation, taxation, tariffs, availability of capital, monopoly markets, and labor costs. The shift in automotive manufacturing from Michigan to other states and countries is the most obvious manifestation of this phenomenon.

No single one of these social, philosophical shifts is culturally catastrophic, but each is part of the cumulative pressure changing our society. The outcomes will not be apparent next week; they will emerge over the next several centuries.

What then can America do to survive, to prosper, to lead? We can start by facing the reality that we will not be destroyed by struggle and sacrifice. We count among our assets a land of unparalleled resources, inhabited by a population of immense talent and intellectual energy. We need not be disheartened by the job ahead.

America knows in its heart what's broken. We have borrowed and spent too much and have encouraged speculators and thieves in a decade of decadence. Our schools don't work, and our factories are outdated. We are becoming unwitting prisoners of our reduced national aspirations; we have lost faith in each other. As individuals and as a nation, we need to pay off our creditors, increase our productivity, reinvest in our infrastructure development, accelerate the training of our people at all ages, and enhance our nation's intellectual and scientific knowledge.

Our elected leaders can help us get back on track by turning their backs on electioneering and short-term political advantage for the sake of essential structural change. And citizens must not expect simplistic solutions to complex national problems. It is time for America to face the agenda of the future.

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