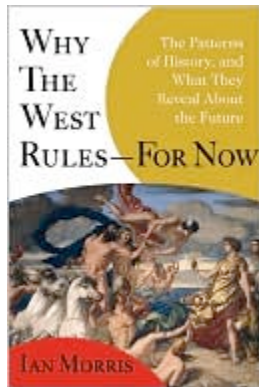




Why the West Rules--For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future

Ian Morris

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I want to thank you for joining us.

It is a pleasure to have Ian Morris as our speaker this morning. Professor Morris' book [Why the West Rules—For Now](#) has received nothing but praise for its remarkably inventive and masterly narrative. It is a book that is important for two essential reasons: First, it addresses the controversy about why the West has dominated the world for the last few centuries; and secondly, it is applauded for Professor Morris' original explanation to the frequently asked question, "How long will the West stay on top?"

When looking towards the past, most of us at some point or another have wondered why history is so dramatically different around the world. There are numerous theories. Professor Morris has separated them into two schools of thought.

One explanation is what our speaker describes as the "lock-in theory." This thesis argues that from time immemorial some critical factor, such as geography, climate, or culture, was responsible for advancing Western civilization.

Another possibility is what he refers to as the "short-term accident" theory. This view argues that Western rule is a temporary aberration.

While each theory wrestles with the idea of dominance, Professor Morris has concluded that the two hypotheses are both flawed and have misunderstood the shape of history. Accordingly, in *Why the West Rules—For Now* Professor Morris argues for a different perspective of his own.

Utilizing his knowledge as a historian, his experience as an archaeologist, and the tools of a social scientist, he skillfully makes sense of the past, present, and future to develop an interdisciplinary approach that relies on experts, whose findings he deftly interprets.

In researching the patterns of history, Professor Morris discovered that humans are much the same wherever they are located, and societies have pretty much followed a similar sequence of cultural development.

"It is not," he writes, "differences of race, culture, or even the strivings of great individuals, that explain Western dominance." Instead, he found that "when a crisis strikes, it is how ordinary people use their ingenuity to interact with the effect of geography, which in turn impacts their ability to shape their physical, economic, social, and intellectual environment to their own ends." In other words, social development changes the face of geography.

Today, many worry that the emerging economic power of China and India spell the end of Western dominance. In exploring this possibility, it is instructive to see how the past transformed the present.

Why the West Rules—For Now is our instruction manual for answering why the West came to rule the world, but it is also helpful in predicting what the next 100 years may bring.

To learn more, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our speaker today, Ian Morris.

Remarks

IAN MORRIS: Thank you for that introduction. I should probably just not say anything now so I don't spoil the effect you've created.

I'm here to talk about my new book, *Why the West Rules—For Now*, beautifully produced from the fine people at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, available in all good bookstores, and I hope also in lots of not-very-good bookstores.

The title of the book is *Why the West Rules—For Now*. Does the West rule? This is a question that comes up pretty often. It makes reasonable sense—or at least within the terms of a book title—to talk about the West ruling and dominating the planet. Obviously, Western powers do not get their own way all the time, or every time they try to do something in the world.

According to *The Economist's* little book, [The Pocket World in Figures](#)—my source of all truth in the world—European and North American countries control something like two-thirds of the world's GDP, about two-thirds of the weapons (at least of the categories that are in that book); and more than two-thirds of the research-and-development money in the world; and yet, they only have about one-seventh of the world's population.

You may want to cavil with the use of the word "rules" in the title of the book. But there has never been a situation in the history of the world, prior to the last 200 years or so, in which such a small part of the world exercises so much power and dominance.

The obvious question is, will this last? This is one of the major questions that drove me in writing this book.

I got a new perspective on it just recently. Steve Weil, from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, who is here today, set up a talk for me the Saturday before last. I was going to go on my first TV appearance about the book. We were getting all this up, and I got all the information by email.

He said, "You're going to be on this new show from San Francisco. It's a very dynamic news program. They don't want to be locked up in a studio all the time. They want to strike out boldly into the community and broadcast from among the people." "So," said Steve, "show up at the Airport Home Appliance superstore in San Jose."

I went there to its parking lot. As far as the eye can see, there's acres of parking lot, and nobody is there, just me. It's right under the flight pattern. There are these huge planes flying above, and it feels like they're going to touch the top of the car.

I go in. There's this warehouse-size place with miles of appliances. I'm walking and I'm walking and I'm walking. Finally, I find the guy whose news show I'm going to be on.

He says, "I've got ten minutes with a gadget guy and then I've got fifteen minutes with the cooking section, but in between we've got five minutes, and that's where you go."

Great, the big time. It was actually very good. We had a great discussion.

Then we were coming to the end of our five minutes and he said, "The title of the book kind of implies that Western dominance is coming to an end. What makes you think that?"

I'm standing there looking around. As far as the eye can see there are tens of thousands of refrigerators and washing machines. Every last one of them is made in Taiwan, South Korea or People's Republic of China. And we're talking about what makes me think Western domination might be coming to an end. It was a surreal experience. That was a couple of Saturdays ago.

[Winston Churchill](#), famous part-time historian, announced at one point "the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." I've always felt as a historian that there's a lot of truth in this maxim.

It's an idea that gets a lot of lip service in politics and policy circles generally. I feel as a professional historian that, on the whole, people in policy circles don't actually take that as seriously as they should. I don't think there is enough historical thought going into a lot of the decisions that are being made.

One of the things that drew me to being a historian in the first place was the feeling that the world didn't necessarily have to turn out the way that it did turn out so far.

Was it possible for the world to be radically different from the world we live in? What would it be like if the world had turned out completely differently from the one that we now live in?

I start my book with a little scene set in London in 1848. But this is not the London you might be familiar with from your historical knowledge. This is a kind of "Twilight Zone" London, in which things have turned out very differently.

At the start of my book, there has been no [Opium War](#), the famous, rather squalid war in which the British shot their way into China in the early 1840s and imposed peace terms on the Chinese. This has not happened.

Instead, in 1848 a Chinese governor, the Governor [Qiyong](#), is coming to London to dictate peace terms to the British. The British are going to accept these terms, and then Prince [Albert](#) is going to be sent back to Beijing to sign the papers and make Britain formally a vassal state of the [Qing Dynasty](#) in China.

In reality of course this is not what happened. British ships did shoot their way into China in the 1840s. Albert stayed with [Victoria](#) back in London. This is not what happened.

Instead of the Chinese Empire shattering the British Empire, taking away Albert into captivity, what happens of course is that the British Empire shatters the Chinese Empire. Emperor [Daoguang](#) sees his rule basically wiped out. The British and French then come back a few years later and do a similar thing to his son, [Xianfeng](#).

This story at the beginning of the book then leads me into the major questions in my book. I will read you a little bit from the book, which sets up the questions that I am asking:

"Prince Albert expired just a few months after Xianfeng. Despite spending years campaigning to persuade the British government that poor drains spread disease, Albert

probably died from typhoid carried through Windsor Castle's wretched sewers. Sadder still, Victoria—as deeply in love with modern plumbing as Albert—was in the bathroom when he passed away.

"Robbed of the love of her life, Victoria sank deeper into moods and melancholy. But she was not completely alone. British officers presented her with one of the finest curiosities that they had looted from the Summer Palace at Beijing: a Pekingese dog. She named him Looty.

"Why did history follow the path that took Looty to Balmoral Castle, there to grow old with Victoria, rather than the one that took Albert to study Confucius in Beijing? Why did British boats shoot their way up the Yangtze in 1842, rather than Chinese ones up the Thames? To put it bluntly: Why does the West rule?"

That is the opening question for my book, and the thing that I try to address. As you were just hearing, there are countless theories about this.

I concluded, after wrestling with this for some time, that to answer this question you need to approach the problem on a global scale and with a very deep historical perspective.

Cutting straight to the chase, I concluded that basically to answer this question the historian needs three tools, three methods of looking at the past:

The first thing I suggest in my book is that we need to know about biology. Basically, this tells you what we are. We are clever chaps. We are the same all over the world. We are clever chimpanzees. We behave in ways which are astonishingly like other animals. We are just on the whole better at getting what we want out of the world than most other—not all, but most other—animals.

The second thing I suggest we need to know about is sociology—how societies work, how they respond to change, and what the regularities are around the world.

From biology and sociology you can get a general picture of the whole history of the world that applies to all human beings in all places. My take on this is very much that humans are the same wherever you find them, whenever you look at them.

These produce universal theories about why on the whole, since the end of the last Ice Age, about 15,000 years ago, social development has generally moved upward all over the world.

Biology and sociology, though, don't help explain the differences around the world.

The third tool that we need is geography. I argue in my book that geography more or less answers our question about why the West rules. It is not about culture, it's not about religion, it is not about great men or bungling idiots, it's not about politics directly. Geography is what has driven the story.

I quote with approval from a book of about 100 years ago called *The Art of Biography*, about how to write a biography, which begins with this great sentence: "The art of biography is different from geography. Biography is about chaps, but geography is about maps." The basic line in the book is basically, "It's the map, stupid." This is what drives everything.

This is a very simplistic-sounding theory, but there is a little bit more to it than this, and history is a very messy thing.

Geography explains why the West rules, but does so in rather complicated kinds of ways. It's like a two-way street. Geography drives the development of societies, but at the same time the development of societies changes what geography means. This has been the main motor in causing wealth and power to move around the world where the centers of gravity are.

Another famous definition that I quote is from [Ambrose Bierce](#) from about 100 years ago in this little book he wrote, called *The Devil's Dictionary*, which has perverse definitions of everything. When he gets to the letter H, he says: "History, *n.* An account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools."

There's something to this. I am a history professor. I have taught much about these things.

I spend most of the book—and you see it's a substantial tome—showing how the messy realities of history fit this pattern. I've got a very straightforward theory about geography driving the shape of the world. The only way you can try to demonstrate that theory is by showing how all of these details actually can be accommodated within this theory.

If you want to get the deep truth about everything, what you need to do is buy my book and read it very carefully. But what I am going to do now is give you a rather breathless tour of world history in about ten minutes.

I realize 8:30 AM is rather early in the day for a history lecture. I was invited by a friend of mine to NYU yesterday to give a lecture at 9:30 in the morning to his students. They seemed to feel that 9:30 AM was pretty early for a history lecture. But I'm going to do it anyway, because you gave me this podium, so I'm going to do it.

What I want to do is just quickly illustrate the thesis in the book that geography has shaped the development and the distribution of power and wealth in the world over the last 15,000 years, but at the same time the development of societies has changed what the geography means across this period. This is the core thing in the book.

If we flip back 15,000 years ago, to the end of the last Ice Age, what we find when you get there is that geography dictates that there were about half-a-dozen places around the world where wild species of plants and animals had evolved that could be domesticated by humans. Geography dictated this. They simply couldn't evolve in other parts of the world. As a result of that, these places where these species have evolved is where the domestication of plants and animals begins. This was in half-a-dozen places around the world.

The densest distribution of these potentially domesticable plants and animals is in what we now call southwest Asia—basically the borderlands of Iran, Iraq, southeast Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel. It's kind of in a big curve around there.

People are all pretty much the same everywhere in the world. It's no surprise that where these species were most densely concentrated is the first place they get domesticated. By about 9000 BC, you are getting the beginnings of agriculture and farming in this region.

The other half-dozen places of the world have somewhat less dense concentrations of these plants and animals. Domestication follows on a couple thousand years later in the middle of China, in what is now Pakistan, and in a couple places in the New World.

In each of these places, when domestication starts, the population grows enormously. The complexity of the societies grows as well, as they have to deal with having so many more people.

Agriculture spreads out from these initial core areas through emigration and through emulation by people in neighboring societies. Large civilization traditions begin to grow out of these areas, like a Western tradition growing out of southwest Asia, an Eastern one out in China, a South Asian tradition growing out of the Pakistan region. Expansion is going on out of these areas.

One of the most interesting things that we see—the prehistorians get very worked up about this— is that the expansion doesn't go at an even speed. Out of the westernmost core in Eurasia, in what is now

southwest Asia, farming spreads very quickly across Europe, within a few thousand years, but it takes a tremendous length of time to spread down from these foothills in southwest Asia down into Mesopotamia, in what we now call Iraq.

The basic reason is, again, geographical—the climate and ecology are very different down in Iraq than they are up in the foothills. In the foothills, there is enough rainfall to drive the agriculture. Down in Iraq, if you rely on the rainfall to make your crops grow, you are going to have a very, very bad year; you are going to die; it's not going to happen. You can only make agriculture work down in Iraq if you master the techniques of irrigation.

This doesn't sound so difficult. You dig a ditch and a big hole, the water runs from the river into the big hole, and then when you need it, there it is. It's actually a lot more difficult than that. There are a lot of things you've got to do.

It takes people living in what's now Iraq a couple of thousand years, basically, until about 5000 BC, to master this technology and make it work. But once they do, the development of their societies into irrigation-driven societies changes the meaning of geography. They not only manage to make farming work in Iraq; it works better than it did back in the original core areas of farming.

This is just the first example of this constant process. Geography is driving this process, forcing the problems onto the people. The way that people react to the problems then changes the meaning of geography once you've got the irrigation technology.

Mesopotamia and Egypt rapidly become the major cores in the West. They displace the older core areas up in the hills, which become relatively much less wealthy. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, cities and states develop before they do in any other part of the world because these regions had a head start with the origins of agriculture in the first place.

Each of these changes, changes the meaning of geography again. Access to great rivers becomes vital for cities because they've got to move goods around to feed themselves.

As the cities turn into states and empires, access to a sea becomes vital, because it's so much better for communication. The Mediterranean Sea becomes this great motor of change. It changes its meaning. Particularly there is a kind of a drifting of the center of gravity in the West into the Mediterranean basin, because that allows you to do all this stuff that you couldn't do without a sea.

So the Roman Empire becomes the greatest empire in the world. We see the rise of ancient empires all across the zone, from Rome in the West out to [Han Dynasty](#) China in the East.

When this happens, it changes geography once again. The steppes running across Central Asia suddenly become a kind of highway that people can move back and forth along, interacting with these empires—plundering them, taking them over from time to time. This drives social development up even further.

But it creates all kinds of new problems as well. The empires, it turns out, are just not very good at controlling migration along the steppes. By the early first millennium AD, the empires in fact start to fall to pieces, driven largely by migrations along these steppes, as geography keeps changing its meaning.

That drives even more changes in the meaning of geography. At the east end of the Old World, the Chinese are able to put a great empire back together in the 6th century. They are able to tap into a new frontier of rice agriculture. China becomes enormously wealthy and powerful during what in the West we call the Middle Ages.

The [Tang Dynasty](#) is the high point in many ways, the golden age of Chinese culture. [Li Bai](#) has a Tang Dynasty [poem about longing for home](#). I can't actually read it, but I've been assured that this is what Li Bai says.

The western end of Eurasia, political changes change the meaning of geography once again. No one is able to reunite a great empire after the fall of Rome, which has all kinds of consequences.

The eastern end of Eurasia, for the first time in history, becomes the most wealthy and powerful part of the world; it becomes the center of invention. Science and technology flourish in medieval China, which—you will probably have guessed where we are going next—once again changes the meanings of geography.

Particularly, two inventions the Chinese come up with in the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries have enormous implications. These are working oceangoing ships and working guns.

Oceangoing ships are a great idea. You can cross oceans in them. Everybody likes this. They spread like wildfire. Within a few generations, the techniques that make this work have spread from China to the furthest fringe of backward Western Europe.

Working guns apparently are even better. People really love the guns. The first known thing that looks vaguely like a modern gun dates to 1288. It was found in Manchuria. By 1328, just 40 years later, we see illustrations in a manuscript in Oxford of a vastly superior kind of gun. It spread the entire length of Eurasia in 40 years. A remarkable thing.

Put together oceangoing ships and working guns and this is a very powerful package. The ships allow you to cross the oceans. The guns allow you to shoot the people you meet on the other side. This is great for everybody who's got them.

But it changes the meaning of geography once again. This in a way is kind of the crux of the argument in the book.

Western Europe, up until now, has been laboring under huge geographical disadvantages. It sticks out into the north Atlantic, which is a terrible place to be sticking out into. I grew up there. Take my word for this. [Laughter] It's a long way from the center of action in the world.

Once you get the oceangoing ships, all of a sudden an important geographical fact abruptly changes its meaning. To get from northwest Europe to the Americas is about 3,000 miles sailing with the wind across the Atlantic. To get from China to the Americas is about 6,000 miles sailing with the winds that you have to take.

Before you had oceangoing ships, this is a fact of geography, but it's completely unimportant, because nobody can cross the oceans so it really doesn't matter. Once you get the ships, this changes everything. All of a sudden, this becomes *the* most important fact in the geography of the world.

Other things being equal, Europeans are simply twice as close to the Americas as the Chinese are. I suggest in the book that, given time, it seems inevitable that sooner or later there would have been a discovery and plundering and colonization of the New World from East Asia. But they don't have time, because the Europeans are simply twice as close.

There are other factors as well involved of course, but the Europeans are the ones who settle in the Americas, take it over, and kill the enormous majority of the native population with their disgusting European germs.

They are the ones who tap into all these guns. As they do so, they start to create a new kind of economy around the shores of the Atlantic, the famous triangular trades, exploiting the comparative advantages of different continents.

The Atlantic Ocean turns out to be a kind of Goldilocks ocean—it's not too big, it's not too small, it's just

the right size to do this kind of thing. [Laughter]

It has all kinds of consequences. Perhaps the most important consequence is the new questions it thrusts onto Europeans.

In many ways, European intellectual life is less advanced in the 15th century, say, than Chinese intellectual life—not a lot less advanced, but a bit less advanced. The Europeans are the ones who are starting to have to confront very new questions by virtue of involvement with the Atlantic economy. They need to know about how the winds and tides and astronomy work in a very practical way, while people in other parts of the world don't confront these problems quite so fiercely.

It requires Europeans to look at nature and think about nature in new kinds of ways. They need new kinds of mathematics, which they promptly develop. A cascade of breakthroughs follows in the basic sciences in the 17th century—physics, chemistry, biology.

The Europeans have a scientific revolution in the 17th century, not because they are smarter than the Chinese or the Indians or the Arabs, but because they are forced to confront a different set of questions. They rise to the challenge. They answer these questions.

In the 18th century, they start to apply some of the insights of the new science back onto their own society, in what we normally call The Enlightenment.

As the 18th century goes on, the British, in particular, find that the new wealth coming in from the new market economy is pushing up wages, making it rather difficult for the British to compete with some other European countries in their manufactures. The British, in particular, start facing the need to mechanize production and, ideally, to tap into new energy sources.

Again, British technology, French technology, Chinese technology—they are not that different as late as the 18th century. But the British have much stronger incentives to figure out "How can we mechanize and put fossil fuels into production in this country?" They're the ones who have an industrial revolution. I suggest in the book this is driven by the way geography has changed its meaning, pushing them down this path.

Coal and steam allowed the British to project power globally. The British conquer India, crush China. By 1850, Britain bestrides the world like a Colossus. When I was in high school, that was where we liked to stop our history courses. Actually that was great. [Laughter]

The problem for Britain is that history did not stop working in 1850. The same processes carry on working. When you've got steamships and railroads, what they do is they draw in the wealth of North America. This is why New York City suddenly of course becomes New York City. They draw in the wealth and resources of North America.

The Americans become industrialized a bit like farming in Mesopotamia back 11,000 years ago. But to make industry work in North America, you've got to do it really quite differently from what they do in Britain. It turns out that the way Americans adapt the industrial revolution to work here is just vastly more successful than the ways the British are doing things in the 19th century.

If I've got the dates right, I believe in 1842 the U.S. economy was something like half the size of the British economy. In 1904, it was twice the size of the British economy. Just a remarkable transformation.

By 1900, of course, North America has become the new core of this global system. Geography changes its meanings again.

Sadly for the people who live in North America, this is still not the end of the process. The same kinds of forces in the 20th century shrunk the Pacific Ocean. A similar kind of move, particularly since the 1950s,

of power and wealth toward East Asia, and a similar kind of reinvention of industrialization that is financing technology in an Asian context—which is, of course, what led me to the warehouse a couple of Saturdays ago surrounded by Asian appliances.

All of these changes are driven by the shifts in the meaning of geography; basically geography explains why the West rules. That's the core thesis of the book.

The implication of this thesis is the shift from West to East in power and wealth going into the 21st century. This is a very deep, very profound phenomenon.

This is not something that you fix by fiddling with the exchange rates or banning Chinese tires or anything like that. This is a very profound movement. Thinking you can fix it by changing the exchange rate is a bit like thinking you can stop the spread of farming by picking mushrooms. It's not going to happen.

You could look at that and say, "This is another declinist theory. This is very much in the mold of [Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*](#)." To some extent, yes it is.

But also there are sides to this as well. When you look back across history at these great shifts in wealth and power, these are things that people do have the capacity to manage what is happening. It may not be possible for the actions of individuals to really change the great geographical forces, but they certainly can be managed and shaped.

One of the things that I sometimes find a bit alarming is when you look at contemporary American writings on the changes in the distribution of power around the world now, they are so uncannily similar to what a lot of Europeans were writing 100 years ago. In the European case, they are all hand-wringing about the shift in power from Britain and France to America. They will say, "It's terrible, terrible. What can we do?" If you just substitute America and China, you get really remarkably similar kinds of things.

A lot of the British fears of 100 years ago about what was going to happen in the 20th century came true. But Europeans now typically live more than 30 years longer than they did 100 years ago, and earn in real terms five times as much as they did 100 years ago.

The relative decline in wealth and power of Western Europe in the 20th century was a very good thing for the area in many ways. European anxieties about this had a lot to do with the outbreak of the World Wars and German attempts to unite the continent as a way to resist this shift in power away from Europe. These were at least partially driven by wild reactions to the shifts in power around the world.

This is a very obvious thing about what we are confronting at the moment. People have to understand the lessons of history and think very carefully about how you respond to these sorts of challenges.

The last thing I want to say: The subtitle of my book is *The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future*.

In the last chapter of my book, I have tried to go a bit further still, rather than just a few rather obvious policy truisms that come out of the history.

I love all these books that are out there such as [America in 2050](#) and [The Next Hundred Years](#). You can pick them up at airports all over the country. I devour these things like candy. I absolutely love them.

But—big but—my feeling is a lot of these books are written by people who don't have much historical sense. They tend to see the future as being just like the present but shinier, bigger, and richer. China, in particular, will be richer, but basically it's all going to be the same.

It's what I always think of as "the Star Trek fallacy." I loved *Star Trek*, the TV show, growing up, where

you've got phasers and warp drive and Scotty beams Captain Kirk up and down. But apart from that, it's exactly the same as L.A. in 1965 when they started making it. [Laughter] You change a technology, but nothing else changes.

It seems to me that the one thing we can be absolutely confident about is that the 21st century is not going to be the 20th century but shinier. That is absolutely not going to happen.

I suggest at the end of my book that in fact there are only two possible outcomes really for the way things are going in the 21st century.

One I get to by basically projecting 20th century trends forward. I say: What would happen if social development in the East and West continue to rise in the 21st century at the same rates as in the 20th century?

This leads me to the wonderfully ridiculous prediction that Eastern social development will catch up with Western in the year 2103—a nice, precise prediction. I could probably work it out to the exact day with the system I use, if I were foolish enough to want to do that. But if you just project the trends forward, this is the result you get: A shift from West to East unfolding across the 21st century.

The real question is: What does that imply? This implies change on a scale in the 21st century that dwarfs anything that anybody today alive can imagine.

I have this numerical index for measuring social development which runs through the book. On this index, the amount of change in the next 100 years, if 20th century rates continue, will be four times as much as the amount of change in the least 15,000 years. This is absolutely mind-boggling.

It implies cities of 140 million people. We would have all of the world's great cities bundled into one.

Weapons would make our nuclear weapons today as irrelevant as machine guns made musket fire. Total transformation of the way war is conducted.

Most astonishing of all, is a total transformation of information and technology. People will often refer to this now as the linked revolution—genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics. It is just changing absolutely everything.

A futurist named [Ray Kurzweil](#)—I'm sure many of you will have heard of him, one of the great inventors of the last 30 years—has written a series of books referring to this as what he calls "the singularity," the idea that change is going to be happening so fast in the 21st century that it will feel like change is instantaneous. Nothing will stay where it is for more than moments.

Kurzweil suggests change is going to transcend biology altogether. We will cease to be human beings basically. There is a huge controversy about this.

But if the rates of change do continue at the 20th century kinds of paces, we are looking at something like this. Something of this kind, something of a singularity, is what lies in our future.

One possibility I suggest is that change on this absolutely unimaginable scale will not just change the meanings of geography, but make geography basically meaningless, and change the meanings of our biology as well.

Another history lesson that we can draw my book is that looking at the past is not just seeing the trends that are going forward, but also seeing how through history the trends have generated the forces that undermine them at the same time. This is what makes history so complicated and messy.

We see it over and over again—the fall of the Roman and Han empires 2000 years ago, lots of earlier

examples, lots of more recent examples—growth of empires generating the forces that undermine them.

The same kinds of issues continue to work in the 21st century. In fact, in all of the great collapses in history, the same five factors keep coming up. They are five factors which are uncannily familiar to people in the early 21st century:

- Uncontrolled mass migration.
- State failure is another one that keeps recurring.
- Famine is another one that keeps recurring.
- Mass epidemic diseases, the fourth of these factors.
- The last one, which is always involved in very complicated relationships with the others but is always there in a major collapse, is climate change.

This of course reads like a checklist from *Time* magazine or something, about the dangers now facing us. It is a very, very scary set of problems facing us.

It seems to me perfectly plausible that in the 21st century these kinds of forces will undermine the trends that are driving development upwards, as they have done so often before. It is impossible at the moment to say which way it is going to go.

If the countervailing forces do undermine the trends, the collapse we face is going to be vastly bigger than anything in any previous history, simply because we now have nuclear weapons. We have the ability to destroy ourselves in a way that the Romans and invading Germanic tribes just didn't have.

The prediction that we can make on the basis of history is that the 21st century is going to be like a giant race between, on the one hand, something like the singularity that Kurzweil talks about, and on the other hand, some kind of nightfall scenario, where we trigger a set of changes that we simply can't control, and we are looking at a collapse of civilization on a scale that has never been seen before in history.

Either way, this is kind of the irony at the end of the book—the next 100 years is going to see, one way or another, more change than the last 100,000 years, even down to the level of our basic biology.

By the time Eastern social development catches up with Western social development, it is perhaps no longer going to matter very much whether the West still rules. The world is going to be so different from the world we are used to by the late 21st century.

I just want to read you a little bit from the end of the book. I suggest at the end of my book:

"This should not be a shocking conclusion. As long ago as 1889, while the world was still shrinking from size large to size medium, a young poet named [Rudyard Kipling](#) could already see part of the same truth. Freshly back in London from the far-flung battle line, Kipling got his big break with a ripping yarn of imperial derring-do called 'The Ballad of East and West.'

"It tells the story of Kamal, a border raider who steals an English colonel's mare. The colonel's son leaps onto his own horse and pursues Kamal through the desert in a chase of epic proportions. ('They have ridden the low moon out of the sky, their hoofs drum up the dawn, / The dun he went like a wounded bull, but the mare like a new-roused faun').

"Finally, the Englishman is thrown from his horse. Kamal charges back at him, rifle raised. But all ends well: the two men 'looked each other between the eyes, and there they found no fault, / they have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on leavened bread and salt.'

"This is stirring stuff, but it is the poem's opening line—'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'—that gets all the attention, mostly from people quoting it as an example of the 19th-century West's insufferable self-satisfaction. Yet that was surely not the effect Kipling was hoping for. What he actually wrote was"—and this rarely gets quoted, the whole first verse:

*"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
Tho they come from the ends of the earth!"*

"As Kipling saw it, people (real men, anyway) are all much the same; it is just geography that obscures the truth, requiring us to take a trip to the ends of the earth to figure things out. But in the 21st century, soaring social development and a shrinking world are making such trips unnecessary. There will be neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth when we transcend biology. The twain shall finally meet if we can just put off nightfall long enough.

"Can we do that? I think the answer is yes. The great difference between the challenges we face today and those that defeated [Song Dynasty](#) China when it pressed against the hard ceiling of its society a thousand years ago and the Roman Empire another thousand before that is that we now know so much more about the issues involved. Unlike the Romans and the Song, our age may yet get the thought it needs.

"On the last page of his book [Collapse](#), the biologist and geographer [Jared Diamond](#) suggested that there are two forces that might save the world from disaster: archaeologists (who uncover the details of earlier societies' mistakes) and television (which broadcasts their findings).

"As an archeologist who watches a lot of television, I certainly agree, but I also want to add a third savior, history. Only historians can draw together the grand narrative of social development; only historians can explain the differences that divide humanity and how we can prevent them from destroying us.

"This book, I hope, might help a little in the process."

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Larry Bridwell, Pace University. You mentioned geography. There are some people saying that this appliance store that you went to takes a lot of steel, and that there may not be enough natural resources in the world to continue all this economic growth. We've also got this rare earth stuff going on in China.

I would appreciate your geographical comments on whether there are going to be enough resources for 7 billion people.

IAN MORRIS: That is obviously an important question to address.

By the year 2050, most demographers think that there will be 9 billion people on earth, and the population will peak round about there and then start falling. This is significantly more people than there are now.

Pressures are going to grow and grow. These are the sorts of pressures that have come up again and again in the past. Population pressure is always a bottleneck.

When you confront these sorts of pressures, either societies find ways to deal with these pressures or they don't. That is a very simple and very obvious thing to say.

Either we will find a way to transcend the limits of the material resources or we won't.

There are signs that we are in the process of finding ways around some of these issues. Food supply is another similar kind of thing.

People are developing new kinds of materials, finding ways to change existing materials so they behave differently.

I am reasonably optimistic that that sort of material constraint is not going to prove decisive—although, as has repeatedly happened in the past, bottlenecks in supply of raw materials can have a hugely destabilizing effect on what is going on. Think of 1930s Germany, with concern about access to materials and in Japan of course even more so in the early 1940s. Concern about access to materials can drive people to do some really crazy things.

I talk about these issues quite a bit in the book. These are the things where there is a rather casual phrase that I use about the need to manage these shifts that are driven by very deep forces which are largely beyond our control.

Management—this is an enormous thing—the ability to manage the challenges that arise from running low on raw materials. Trying to get the raw materials in parts of the world where people can't get to them is an enormous challenge.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*. Going from Larry's resources to geopolitics and demographics, with the development of transportation and communication and so on. [Robert Conquest](#) and others have proposed perhaps a political unity between the United States and the United Kingdom, and perhaps with a few other continental nations as well, particularly in the face of overwhelming numbers coming in from China and India and so on.

To what extent do you see that is possible, given that it's a way of protecting so-called Western influence and demographics?

IAN MORRIS: A very good question again.

Yes, when you look back across the long run of history, for certainly the last 3,000 years, states have been the most effective organizations on the planet. They're the ones who can really get things done.

One of the great problems we've got in the 21st century is that increasingly the kinds of difficulties we're facing are ones that states are just not very well designed to handle. There are a lot of very big problems that operate on the global level—and of course we all know the kinds of difficulties we've seen in getting states to agree on climate policies and so on. So there are a lot of very big global changes happening kind of above the level that any individual state is able to deal with.

There is also a lot of stuff happening on a very small scale that often seems to be addressed better by NGOs, nonstate organizations, and private business activity done by the states.

One of the things we are likely to see in the 21st century—something we already see a little bit—is a continuing erosion of the states by other kinds of institutions, either multinational institutions, very local institutions, or even the kind of thing you are talking about, which is the merging of states.

In some ways it is difficult to imagine a situation in which something like that could happen. When I was a little boy, it would have been astonishing for me to be told that the United Kingdom and France were talking about merging their navies. I think I would have shot myself if I had been told that.

We do see some of these things starting to go on. The European Union, again, is something which 100 years ago would have been very difficult to imagine, all these countries giving up their currencies and so on, for better or worse, I guess. But some of these changes would have been very difficult to imagine.

I guess I am optimistic that we are going to see our leaders rising to some of these challenges and figuring out new ways to do things. But maybe we won't.

QUESTION: Robert James. I am a businessman here. You didn't mention religion, which has been fairly important for a long time.

IAN MORRIS: Yes. I have a lot to say about religion in the book. One of the really interesting global regularities you see, if you look back a very long way in history, is back in, say, Bronze Age civilizations, before about 1000 BC, almost all of them, their major source of social authority is religious power, the idea that somebody among us has privileged access to a supernatural sphere.

If I said to you that God spoke to me this morning and he said, "Come to the Carnegie Council," you would think I was a little bit peculiar. But if you actually believed that, if you believed that I had this access that you didn't have, it of course starts to make a great deal of sense to do what I say.

Although we can't trace the details very well, because a lot of this is in the prehistoric period, again and again throughout early history we see this association of political power and religious authority. One of the big themes in my book is looking at how these sorts of ideas shift and move around.

We do see very long-term changes in the place of religion and in the way societies work. Basically, on the very long, 5,000-year scale, there has been a rolling-back of religion out of the political and economic sphere. Of course, there are lots of exceptions to that, ups and downs. But on the whole, as a sweeping generalization, the places where religion has reasserted itself, have taken more control of the way society functions, and have tended to do less well than the places where this has not happened.

I talk a little bit toward the end of my book about the current situation of the Islamic world, because obviously this is something that people are very aware of these days. Up until relatively recently, the wealthiest, most vibrant parts of western Eurasia were the Muslim parts, certainly up till about 1500, and arguably even beyond that.

Another of the regularities that we can see when we look back along the long reach of history is the way that when one region within the world experiences severe military defeats and relative economic decline relative to its neighbors, religious authority often does reassert itself. We see this a couple of times in Chinese history. This is what we have seen in some parts, at least, of the Muslim world since about 1700.

This sense of defeat at the hands of the Europeans has become more and more pervasive. We have an example of this kind of withdrawal to a sense that "God is really on our side and God is going to make it all okay in the long run."

I didn't say anything about religion in the talk this morning, but it's actually one of the big themes in the book. I think it is one of the major issues in history.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim. There are, at least in some modes of thinking, two sort of paradigmatic

futures in terms of the growth areas, and they are China and India. You talked about how geography and the response to it fosters invention and the development of institutions. Can you tell us a little bit about the difference between those two countries and which is more adaptable in terms of the future?

IAN MORRIS: Yes. If you were some gambling alien from outer space and you come to earth in 1600 and somebody asks you to put your money on which areas of the world you think are going to be the most powerful and dominant by the year 2000, I would bet that you would bet most of your money on China and India as the obvious contenders. You would probably, unless you've read my book, be rather surprised when Europe emerges as the top dog of the 19th century.

One of the things that I suggest in my book is that what geography mostly does is kind of speed up and slow down the processes of social development. Other things being equal, if the Western Europeans had not been sailing around the world in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries and taken things over, China and India would probably have followed much the same path as Europe did and would have had an autonomous, indigenous industrial revolution, and would have gone on to colonize large parts of the world.

They don't do that largely because, once one part of the world has had an industrial revolution, it then has the power to project its power globally. The British were able to dominate India and have a major say in what was happening in China, which had enormous consequences for those societies.

I think, in common with several social scientists, that one of the big things in shaping how sections of Asia developed in the 20th century was the history of colonial intervention in these regions. If you look at China, it is somewhat carved up into spheres of influence in the late 19th century. India, of course, is entirely taken over by the British.

The speed at which societies developed in the late 20th century and into the 21st century seems to me to be driven largely by a combination of their levels of development before the European powers came up in the 19th century, combined with their colonial history since then.

The societies that are already relatively very well developed in the 19th century, like China and Japan, that don't get extensively colonized, they have come forward much faster in the late 20th century than other societies.

Ones like, sub-Saharan Africa, which are not highly developed before the arrival of colonization but then also do get extensively colonized, have moved most slowly.

India is a very highly developed, pretty modern society, but it was extensively colonized by the British. India is moving forward quickly, but not as quickly as China and Japan.

I spend quite a bit of time talking about the differences between China and Japan. It's fascinating why Japan moved into the industrial age so rapidly whereas China moved slowly.

These sort of relatively small differences between countries are things where the decisions of leaders often do have a big impact.

We are going to see an increasing role for India and South Asia in the world economy in the early and into the mid-21st century. That is largely predictable on the basis of the kind of geographical forces that I talk about in the book.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson. Since you've given us thousands of years of history and the balance of power in each period, and we have gone through the balance of power in Europe and then passing to the "Big Two" in the Cold War—you didn't mention Russia, but it was once considered the other great power—and then we had one sole superpower, and now we are moving again toward multi-polarity.

The question is: How much balance there can be and whether the leaders will trade with each other rather than killing each other.

Could you add another pole, which would be South America? Brazil, not completely colonized and with enormous natural resources, is another possibility. So how would you think of your balance of power in 2050 or the 21st century?

IAN MORRIS: We are moving—and this is hardly an original thought on my part—into a much more complicated geopolitical situation. I talked a little bit about this uncanny similarity between contemporary American writings about the rise of China and the writings from 100 years ago in Western Europe about the rise of America and how worried this made the West Europeans.

There are a number of analogies between what is happening now and what was happening 100 years ago.

A lot of historians will say that one of the reasons you get this long peace in Europe between 1850 and 1914 is the sheer financial muscle of Britain. If you're on the European continent, and you want to do something kind of wild and hairy, if the British are against this, you are going to think very long and hard about doing it.

By about 1870 that is beginning to break down. Britain is richer than ever, but Germany and the United States, in particular, are much richer too. It's becoming a multipolar world.

Britain by 1902 actually concludes the first ever naval alliance it has had with a foreign power: It makes a treaty with Japan, because it recognizes it can no longer project its power properly into the Pacific.

The world gets messier and messier. Again, you have much of an argument about what exactly the causes of the First World War were, but a lot of historians think this is a major part of it, this messiness of the world. The Germans, in particular, feel that "the world is now sufficiently messy that we can go against the British, we can take the chance of the British coming into a continental war. We'd prefer it if they don't, but if they do, we'll deal with it."

One of the things that scares me a little bit about the situation we're moving into now is it is beginning to look a little bit like that again.

Since 1989, we've had, as you say, the sole superpower, and you have to be a [Saddam Hussein](#) type to think it's a good idea to just ignore what the United States says and go ahead and do it. We all saw where that led him.

As the 21st century goes on, things are going to get increasingly messy. We are seeing this already in Africa, with the ability of some of the African regimes that we don't care for to just go to China, and Beijing is often a little bit less fussy about what these people are doing inside their own country.

I worry that this is going to generate instability. When there are multiple players out there and multiple places you can appeal to for support, even if we get really high-quality leadership in the United States and in China, there are multiple rising powers around the world who are going to be trying to play the great powers off against each other. As you say, Latin America—Brazil is an obvious case of this.

And Russia, of course. You mentioned I had not mentioned Russia in my talk. Russia is by no means to be written off. They still have the largest nuclear force in the world. It may not work. They fired their—gosh, what was his job?—chief of strategic something or other, they fired him last year. They did all these tests of the submarine-launched missiles and none of them would take off. It was a very unfortunate situation—or maybe a good situation.

The world is becoming a lot more complicated and a lot more dangerous. The analogies with what things

looked like 100 years ago do sort of alarm me a little bit sometimes.

QUESTION: John Richardson. You mentioned the Chinese as being the source of oceangoing ships and working guns. It's my understanding that sometime around the 1300s or the 1400s the dynasty pulled all that back and there was inward looking—a huge export ban, if you will. It was just an inward-looking period. It lasted half a millennium.

Do you see that possibility for any major countries in the 21st century? Is the United States beginning to look inward, run by the religious right, or the Islamic communities, or China? Do you see that happening, people doing that politically?

IAN MORRIS: Yes. The famous case is 15th century China that you talk about. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Chinese are sending these extraordinary fleets into the Indian Ocean, the biggest wooden ships the world ever saw. They were enormous things. The first of these big expeditions had something like 28,000 sailors on it. They had ships with watertight compartments carrying drinking water. They had these huge maps of the Indian Ocean.

A famous fact historians like to bandy around is that when [Columbus](#) sails for the New World, his flagship is shorter than the main mast on [Zheng He's](#) flagship when he is sailing around the Indian Ocean.

Then these voyages get canceled. This is often taken as an illustration of the importance of cultural factors, that China turns its back on the world and turns inward. There's actually rather a lot more to it than that.

We talk about China closing off trade. These perceptions are driven in large part by the difference between what the Europeans are doing and what the Chinese are doing. Judged in European terms, China appears to be turning its back on the world.

In fact, that is not really what happens. It's more a state attempt to monopolize what's going on with the enormous volume of ocean-borne trade of 15th and 16th century China. When Europeans visit ports in China in this period, they are astounded by the number of ships coming and going. In theory, all of these are state ventures, controlled very narrowly. In practice, they are not at all, nothing like it. But this is the theory of it.

Having said that, yes, there certainly are examples of places trying to shut out the outside world. Japan in the 18th century is a classic example of this. There are always very clear, sensible geopolitical reasons why they do this.

When Japan bans the gun, famously—they get rid of a huge number of the guns in the country in the 17th and 18th centuries—they are doing this because East Asia is entering this period of relative interstate stability.

The Chinese Government has decided there is really not much to be gained by waging wars against Japan or in South East Asia. They can get what they want much more cheaply by not getting involved in major wars. Because China is no longer expanding militarily, there is not much threat to the Japanese, and they have this power vacuum they can live in and get rid of a lot of their weapons.

There are occasions when modern societies are in a kind of power vacuum, but it's not all that common. It is very difficult in the 21st century to pull a stunt like that and say, "We are going to shut out the outside world."

That doesn't mean people won't necessarily try to do it. We all know how difficult it is for any group to shut out the forces of globalization. This is a thing certainly to worry about, because surely this will be a major source of instability in the world if there are people who are really trying to close out the outside world. The world is suddenly full of North Koreas. This is not a good development.

I don't worry unduly about this happening. It could certainly be a source of periods of instability if people do try to do this.

JOANNE MYERS: Unfortunately, we have run out of time. I want to thank you for a really exhilarating morning. Thank you so much.

IAN MORRIS: Thank you.

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