

So, What Did You Think Collapse Would Look Like?

Part One (of Two)

by Bill Herbst

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For the past quarter century, I have written about the Collapse of the American Empire and the breakdown of modern civilization. For anyone sufficiently thoughtful or just paying attention, the spectacular success of our particular human species has overwhelmed and fouled the balance of Nature in ways that simply cannot continue indefinitely. Not that we will stop. I see no indication of our collective wisdom increasing in any meaningful way. Instead, we will be stopped. And it appears from where we find ourselves today that Nature will not need to be the agent that stops us (even though that's been approaching closer and closer for quite awhile). No, it looks like human folly may do the job quite effectively.

When I write "our particular human species," I'm referring to "us" — *homo sapiens sapiens*, the sole remaining branch of the genetic human tree that survived to flourish and dominate. There are 8.2 billion of us humans now, and we have just this year entered into what appears poised to become a serious evolutionary bottleneck that could derail our current collective situation on the planet and dish out some serious comeuppance that will challenge our hubris and mock many of our most cherished self-deceptions.

I'm referring, of course, to the Israeli-American attack on Iran, begun at the end of February. Given the entirely predictable results of that assault — namely, Iran's striking back with drones and missiles aimed at the industrial infrastructure of the oil and gas producing GCC states of the Mideast, accompanied by Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, America and the world now face a disaster of major proportions.

No matter what happens with the War from this point on, this tragic, wrong-headed, and completely unnecessary violence cooked up by Netanyahu and carried out by Trump now guarantees catastrophic consequences for the world economy, and perhaps even an overturning of the global order that has existed since the end of World War II.

A little history: The first 120 years of the our nation were devoted to the conquest of the North American continent. America started with 13 colonies on the eastern seaboard. From there we worked steadily westward, acquiring territory by various means. We secured a whole swath of land from the French with the Louisiana purchase of 1803, then fought with Mexico and stole what became the southwestern U.S. By the end of the 19th century, we owned the entire mid-continent "from sea to shining sea" (Atlantic to Pacific). Then we turned our attention from conquest within the continent to beyond it. Overthrowing the independent Hawaiian monarchy and then annexing Hawaii in the 1890s was the first act of the American Empire. After that we reached further, securing our dominion over the Philippines and other Pacific Islands. CIA coups throughout the 20th century insured our domination over Central and South America, cementing the American Empire's influence over the entire western hemisphere.

The two World Wars of the early and middle 20th century destroyed the colonial empires of Europe and Asia, including the Ottoman, Austria-Hungarian, Russian, French, British, German, and Japanese empires. As the only major power in 1945 that had escaped devastation, the American Empire found itself unchallenged, and so took on the crown of the world's sole remaining superpower. The next 80 years of America's hegemonic authority can be divided into equal halves — the 40-year Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the subsequent 40 years that followed the collapse of the Soviet state.

Through that period, from 1945 until now, the American Empire reigned supreme. Cheerleaders for the Empire claim that America's dominance was basically benign, that we instilled the rule of law, that our powerful navy insured safe commercial traffic on all the world's oceans, and that skilled American diplomacy kept the major powers from attacking each other. They credit the U.S. with preventing a repeat of the two catastrophic World Wars of the 20th century.

Critics of the Empire challenge those assertions as empty platitudes, and counter by pointing out that America didn't really support global democracy, but instead cozied up to dictators and scoundrels as long as they were anti-communist and did our bidding. Donald Trump's aggrieved insistence that other countries took unfair advantage of America's generosity is not only wrong but ridiculous. America always profited handsomely, flourishing economically and financially from our global position of power and prestige.

Where the American Empire didn't fare as well was with warfare. A couple of our military excursions over the 80 years were successful — Grenada in 1983 and Desert Storm in 1991 stand out. But many other wars we initiated ended as defeats with disastrous outcomes. These include Vietnam, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq. To those humiliations we can now add Iran, which, after less than two months, ranks as the worst military blunder and abject defeat the U.S. has ever

suffered, with horrific repercussions soon to come for America and the world that might potentially dwarf all our previous misadventures.

Could this recent attack on Iran signal the end of the American Empire? I don't know for sure, but it's a distinct possibility. Many Americans are wondering how this could have happened. Well, it's no surprise. The roots of both the arising and the downfall of our particular Empire run very deep. Just as Trump and his minions are not outliers, but instead echo deep-seated "values" that are clearly embedded in the American psyche, so the attack on Iran and its predictable consequences are woven into the very fabric of what America is and has been throughout our history. Yes, the Better Angels of our nature are embodied within the American psyche, but so are quite dreadful Demons and Monsters. And those Dark Beliefs have emerged in force over the past 50 years, to the point where they now have nearly free reign in America to wreak havoc and harm us.

Looking further back in human history, we saw the arising of modern civilization roughly 12,000 years ago. More recently, the past 500 years have witnessed a virtual explosion of industrial advances and technological innovations, both of which are products of the restless, creative fervor of these big brains of ours. We modern humans have literally transformed our earthly environment into a kind of gigantic Rube Goldberg contraption, an almost unimaginable amusement park run, at least in part, by the some of sickest and most crazed inmates in the asylum, since they are the only ones among our species with enough testosterone to forcibly take charge.

The great bulk of humans do not aspire to run the world. Attempting to raise and support a personal family that is modestly loving and sane is as much as most of us can or want to take on, but even in that limited ambition our overall track record is not very good. So, humans tend to leave running the ship of state to others, a sizable percentage of whom are even more damaged than the rest of us, either corrupt or corruptible, and not even close to dependably trustworthy as competent stewards of collective human well-being.

Despite our occasional efforts to arrange leadership of civilization by the "best and brightest" among us (efforts that were typically abject failures), we have mostly allowed biology to determine who leads the pack. No, this isn't as simple for humans as it is for the great ape bands, where the "800 lb. gorilla" who becomes the leader is literally the strongest physically and the best fighter. Humans determine who will lead us by numerous and more intangible variables. Significant among the criteria for leadership are the status of class and conspicuous wealth, or at least access to it. Even in modern America, lineage still matters, and lots of money is an absolute necessity.

Our species' stunning successes (and there are many) have always been accompanied from within by the seeds of our own destruction — sometimes crudely obvious and other times nearly invisible, but always lurking, waiting

patiently for the time when our cumulative "success" will have finally grown so perversely out of balance and disharmonious that the destructive seeds inside germinate and emerge, causing the many complex systems of society to break down. This is likely to happen ever so slowly over a long time, but eventually critical mass will be reached, whereupon collapse then accelerates exponentially in a spectacular unraveling. The slow build-up was happening over the past eighty years, then the past ten years set the stage, and the unexpected but strangely predictable crack-up may now be fully upon us.

The idea of Collapse might contain the possibility of the actual end of our species. And yes, some of the scenarios for Collapse do include our species' complete extinction as an outcome. However, Collapse doesn't have to imply such an extreme result. It might simply mean the end our accustomed ways of living. In either case, Collapse will be forced upon us, not chosen.

End, Part One.