



The Perils of Forecasting

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By Robert D. Kaplan

In 2004, Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington published his last book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. The book received virtually all bad, in some cases scathing, reviews. Its broad theme was that the continued rise of Mexican immigration, legal and illegal, into the United States, coupled with the ascent of multiculturalism—even while America's policy elites were turning away from America and becoming more cosmopolitan and global—augured for an epic internal crisis in America. Huntington was startling clairvoyant, of course: foreseeing the battle lines of Donald Trump's presidency. But 16 years ago, because many of those trends were relatively undeveloped, the book was considered simply alarmist. Because the book's reviewers were members of the same global elite that the author was criticizing, they were particularly incensed. The book was not a publishing success. By the time Huntington's themes did achieve a heightened reality, he was dead.

Huntington was true to his calling right up to the end of his life. As he once told me, the job of a political scientist is not to improve the world, but to say what he or she thinks is going on in it.

There is a disturbing lesson here. Outside of the intelligence and business communities, which actively appreciate hard-nosed, non-linear thinking in the Huntington manner, being too far ahead of the curve can be problematic to an academic or journalistic career. For even the most clairvoyant theory can be only, say, 80 percent accurate, and colleagues inevitably will concentrate on the 20 percent that is wrong. That is how reputations suffer. And precisely because the pathologies that the theorist has described are only in their early stages at the time of his or her writing, they lack an obvious context, so that the audience reacts with offense or sheer disbelief (or both) to his work.

It gets worse, actually. A day may arrive when your theory is vaguely legitimized by events, at which time your views, rather than be celebrated, are

merely consigned to the conventional wisdom, and thus are of rapidly diminishing relevance. If you protest that such trends as you predicted were not obvious at the time that you wrote about them, nobody is interested. For example, when I mention to people that my book, *Balkan Ghosts*,¹ was actually excerpted in *The Atlantic* in 1989, long before the Balkan wars began—before the Berlin Wall fell even—I am usually met with blank stares. The fact is, it is a very busy world. People are bombarded with information. Even critics have no room in their memories for such details.

The theories that gain the most notoriety are those that are anti-zeitgeist; or non-linear. That is, they do not proceed from current trends, and as a consequence, they create literally scores of enemies. Huntington's essay, *The Clash of Civilizations?* (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993),² my own essay, "The Coming Anarchy" (*The Atlantic*, February 1994),³ and University of Chicago Professor John Mearsheimer's book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) fall into this category.

Keep in mind that the 1990s and the very early-2000s when these writings appeared were a time of barely restrained optimism. Despite the conflicts in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the opinion-setting cosmopolitan elite subscribed to the notion that the world was unifying, markets and free elections constituted the only authentic future for developing nations, and growing middle-classes whether in China or America would all have the same values. Then in marches Huntington, announcing that civilizations were coming into conflict; not harmony. I then arrive, announcing that the natural environment would constitute the greatest security threat of the future, especially in developing nations where institutions were weak. And later on, Mearsheimer proposes that the more China develops economically, somewhat counterintuitively, the more likely that it will come into conflict with the United States.

All of these theories had problems and inconsistencies, and all were wrong in parts. The criticism was thus painful, I can attest. But it is by constructing a theory and then having it taken apart that knowledge accumulates, until a new and perhaps better theory emerges to take its place. The late Thomas S. Kuhn, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explained that useful paradigms make us see the world differently, but because paradigms are by nature imperfect, most of science is a "mopping-

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

² Later expanded into a book, Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³ Later expanded into an essay collection, Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post-Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2000).

up” operation. Kuhn approvingly quotes Francis Bacon that, “Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion.”⁴

It is not only pessimistic theories that come in for assault. So do optimistic ones. Stanford University’s Francis Fukuyama published “The End of History?”⁵ in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The essay claimed that liberal democracy, with all of its faults, was the only system left standing after the failure of fascism and communism, because no other form of government carried the potential to make individual men and women happy in their lives. Therefore, history in a philosophical or Hegelian sense, had reached a sort of climax. Cries of outrage arose at this happy vision of eventual democratic peace. There were the postmodernists, who believed that the world was becoming a contest of narratives in which Western political thought held no particular advantage. And there were the fools, who took the title of the essay quite literally, even though Fukuyama was careful to acknowledge that wars and insurrections would continue as before: it was only the historical debate over which system of governance produced the best results that had ended. Of course, one easily could argue, as I did, that places in the developing world where institutions were weak constituted fertile ground for enlightened or unenlightened authoritarianism, and, therefore, Fukuyama’s vision was too American and European-oriented. But that line of criticism accounted for only a limited number of the attacks on “The End of History?” For in large part, Fukuyama was misunderstood, a common fate for philosophers of his high caliber.

In addition to taking titles too literally, critics also tend to lack historical memory. For example, “The Coming Anarchy” appeared in 1994, and the two West African countries that I concentrated on early in the essay, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire, did indeed fall into utter anarchy in the late-1990s and continued thus for many years to come. Now, more than a quarter-century since the essay was published, a relatively benign news cycle has led some critics to claim that I was wrong all along.

As mentioned earlier, the intelligence and business communities tend to be much more seasoned and thorough in their analyses of ground-breaking paradigms. That is the case because they are not involved in public grandstanding about their own cleverness to the degree that some journalists and academics are. It is also because intelligence agencies and corporations are on a *mission* to try to get the future right: whether for reasons of national security

⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (The University of Chicago Press, (1962) 1970), pp. 18, 23-24, and 111.

⁵ Later expanded into a book, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

or the commercial profit motive. Intelligence services and businesses also know that forecasting a middle-term future of five-to-15 years is essential, and yet they are aware just how difficult it is. They know that linear thinking is hard to escape from, since extrapolating from current trends is often all one ever has to go on. So, they are understanding of attempts at non-linear analysis, even when flawed. And because corporations and businesses meet behind closed doors, they are more willing to countenance blunt, hard-nosed assessments about such things as national cultures than journalists and academics are.

In fact, *culture*, an understanding of which is critical to useful paradigms, is the very word that makes political scientists uneasy. To raise the issue of culture as a factor in geopolitical analysis in such circles is to risk being accused of determinism and essentialism, academic terms for fatalism and stereotyping. But not to consider culture as a factor in the fate of nations is a contradiction in terms. Nations, if they are anything, are cultural entities. For culture is the sum-total of a people's experience inhabiting a particular landscape for hundreds or thousands of years. To dismiss the relevance of culture in politics is, in essence, to dismiss the whole field of anthropology, which is the study of the cultures of whole peoples and ethnic groups, and their social meaning. The policy elite is uncomfortable with all this because in many cases it does not concur with its own life experience: that of having grown up in international settings among a global class that has transcended national and ethnic culture. But since most of the world has not transcended culture, it must remain a vital element of political analysis. To be sure, forecasting is not polite. The most insightful forecasting I have encountered has been centered around culture; not economics or politics.

For example, a decade ago the debt crisis in Europe was not seen for what it really was: a profound cultural crisis in which the southern Mediterranean countries, whose cultures are somewhat more easy-going than those of northern, Calvinist Europe, simply could not adapt to the disciplinary rigors of the Eurozone. They borrowed vastly more than they could pay back. The conventional wisdom, at the time, was still that the European Union somehow would weather what was strictly a financial storm. But now the very *idea* of Europe is more demonstrably in danger for the very reason that—outside of the technocrats in Brussels—no one people in Europe in the final analysis care sufficiently about the fate of the other peoples in Europe. And the reasons are cultural. Indeed, the northerners are sick of paying for the southerners. This is a legacy, by the way, not only of geography, but of different empires and development patterns: Carolingian and Prussian in the north, and Byzantine and Ottoman in the southeast. Seventy-five years after World War II, European politics remain more national than pan-national. And European unity thus rests at a tipping point. At the time I write, it appears that northern

Europe will indeed cough up the money for southern Europe. But it has been a close-run affair.

Huntington's *Clash* was so powerful and prescient precisely because the author, too, was unafraid of the whole subject of culture and civilizations.

Intelligence services and corporations, besides having a willingness to listen to arguments about culture, also harbor historical memories, and so they keep tabs on whether theories vaguely work out as advertised or not. They are not impressed with elegant and engaged writing merely for its own sake. Journalists, contrarily, are consumed with *presentness*. They tend to judge everything from the vantage point of the current news cycle. And it is this obsession with *presentness* that obscures historical context, from which the future can be discerned, however imperfectly. For excepting the hard sciences, often the best that a theory can do is to make people a bit less surprised about the future.

Interestingly, at a time when even the finest elite publications do not cover foreign affairs as seriously and as disinterestedly as they once did, corporations have been reaching out to private forecasting companies to get a cold-blooded sense of the middle-term future in many places. Having worked for two such firms—Stratfor and Eurasia Group—over the course of the recent decade, I can confirm that even when wrong, what such firms really bring to the table is an old-fashioned and comprehensive seriousness about the news of the world and where it is headed, regardless of its human interest value. They also are deliberately amoral: whether an outcome is good or bad does not interest them as a firm. The point is whether they predicted it or not. Such firms are interested in the economic and political behavior of the mass; more so than in the particular story of individuals. After all it is the mass, *the vast average*, that drives history, perhaps more often than the exceptional few, of whom the media makes heroes and villains. And the more that the media as a whole declines—trafficking in the trivial and remaining within predictable philosophical comfort zones—the more necessary such firms will be. Indeed, the media is dominated by liberal arts majors, who are driven by the need to turn the stories of individuals into *narratives*; whereas analysis—the weighing of harsh, unpleasant truths that require abstractions and generalizations—is often the pursuit of math minds.

In sum, true ideas certainly do not win universal praise. True ideas cause anger, argument, resentment, and debate. Forecasting is not for the timid.

Robert D. Kaplan holds the Robert Strausz-Hupé Chair in Geopolitics at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is the author of 19 books on foreign affairs, including: *The Good American*, *The Revenge of Geography*, *The Coming Anarchy*, *Balkan Ghosts*, *Asia's Cauldron*, and *Monsoon*.



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