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Global Dash of Folly

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Individuals have been raising alarm about the impacts of humanity on its life-support systems as far back as George Perkins Marsh in the 1800s and even Plato BCE. But the scientific community only began to give organized voice to environmental concerns in the United States in the late 1960s with the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Resources and Man, followed quickly by the Study of Critical Environmental Problems (SCEP) at MIT in 1970. In 1972, the United Nations held the first Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which was followed by others in 1982 and 1992. Escalating concerns in the 1970s led to passage of an array of environmental legislation in the U.S. and other developed nations, the emergence of the field of conservation biology, and the founding of the Society for Conservation Biology in the 1980s, soon followed by the International Society for Ecological Economics. Important steps included the establishment by the UN in 1988 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the release in 1993 of the joint statement on population by academies of science in 58 nations and the U.S. Union of Concerned Scientists' "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity." Since those early efforts there has been a deluge of scientific papers and meetings detailing the human predicament and suggesting measures to deal with the overgrowth of the human enterprise and its prospective consequences. Scientists also continue to release statements trying to alert the public to their growing concerns (e.g., <http://mahb.stanford.edu/consensus-statement-from-global-scientists/> and a series of IPCC reports, <http://bit.ly/1hpMXCw>).

What brought all this to our minds again was reading a fine book entitled “Japan 1941.” It shows in substantial detail how Japan’s leaders, having miscalculated in starting the war with China (1937), were perfectly aware, in detail, that they could not win a war with the United States. Nonetheless, they proceeded with the fateful attack on Pearl Harbor, planned by Yamamoto Isoroko – ironically one of the Japanese leaders who had explicitly warned against tempting fate. In short, Japan faced an existential threat, and went right ahead risking the end because internal dynamics made it impossible for the nation to change a course many knew was insane. The parallel to today’s situation in the United States (and much of the world) is thought-provoking.

Confronted with an existential threat, the high probability of catastrophic consequences for civilization, and a small probability of the extinction of *Homo sapiens*, society seems paralyzed. The “news” in the U.S. focuses almost entirely on the relatively trivial. Besides the litany of gun deaths and sports reports, the “news” features idiotic battles over budgets or a health-care plan (a small improvement on the previous inequitable system, but not a modern single-payer government system), and the travails of trying to maintain a global empire designed to keep oil and other resources flowing in and products moving out. Evening TV “news” coverage of the quite alarming 2013 IPCC report was eclipsed by a story about a retiring baseball pitcher. Many stories focus on battling terrorism, not mentioning that much of it is largely motivated by such things as slaughtering wedding parties in attempts to kill groups who don’t like the empire’s actions, or that many of the enemies were U.S.-armed “freedom fighters” who have morphed into “terrorists.”

Population growth, the most difficult-to-cure driver on the road to collapse is rarely mentioned, outside of responses to the Census Bureau noting that the runaway population explosion in the U.S. was slowing down. This was greeted by a swarm of stories about how the nation was becoming demographically “stagnant” Overconsumption? All the end-of-the-year talk in 2013 was on the need for growth. Typical was deeply ignorant coverage on NPR, in which a historian opined that the famous Ehrlich, Harte, Holdren bet in 1980 with mail-order-marketer Julian Simon (who thought the human population could grow for another seven *billion* years) “set the stage for a world where environmental debates are framed by the extremes — one side warning of certain catastrophe, and the other saying everything is going to be great.”

Well, things aren’t going great, and they are unlikely to get better even in the middle term. Barbara Tuchman long ago defined “folly” as governments doing incredibly stupid things when knowledgeable groups were explaining to them in detail what was wrong with their actions. The world’s governments are now accelerating folly, repeating the old Japanese pattern of leaders refusing to act on wise advice and detailed information, even when they knew it was right. They

were blinded by tradition, legend, ego, jealousy, and fear of change. The Japanese population was kept in near total ignorance of the nation's military capacities compared to those of the United States, just as the corporate media today ignores what the scientific community is telling us about our capacity to sustain perpetual growth.

Catastrophe looks more likely every day.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org.

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