

# **Thoughts on Coming Apart and the Coming Great Reset**



**Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer**

**Kit Webster**

**Happy New Year**

**December 27, 2024**

**Themes and Theses - Why I'm Contemplating Out Loud**

(Initially formulated in the early 90s, following decades of reading history, philosophy, psychology and a lot of contemplation, particularly on the subject of

cycles. In the end, this is a relatively straightforward story about human nature and of history rhyming.)

The US will enter a period of crisis in the early 2000s. In the late 90s, I incorporated Strauss' and Howe's terminology of the Fourth Turning (without incorporating their generations paradigm) and agreed with Howe that the end stage of the crisis began with the Great Financial Crisis and would last into the early 2030s. We are not yet to the middle of the end stage of the crisis.

The crisis will be serious and could be existential.

Internal strife will increase, up to and including secession and civil war.

International conflicts will increase as the vacuum created by the weakening of the US is filled by other players.

There will be many threads to the crisis, but the primary thread will be debt, deficits and entitlements. Other factors include, eg, demographics, a loss of meaning and myth and a loss of self-discipline.

Politics will move leftward as citizens look for some refuge from the chaos. The US will become increasingly susceptible to a (man) on a white horse, who can come from either the left or the right.

Inflation, as the most likely way to address debt since austerity is not politically acceptable, will significantly lower standards of living, exacerbating the civil crises. Eventually, the dollar will be inflated away and lose its reserve status.

Once the old rot is cleared out, and assuming continuity, there will be the basis for the establishment of a new order. (Added around 2020) The loss of faith by our youth in our founding principles means that the new order will at least partially be based on new principles. As yet, I have no visibility as to what those principles might be.

(Added in the early 00s) While humans are contributing to global warming, policies implemented to address manmade global warming will create a significant energy crisis, probably toward the end of the Fourth Turning.

(Added in 2023) The lowering / elimination of standards in education, the judiciary, law enforcement, the military and other segments of our society will create a population unable to adequately comprehend, do or respond to the challenges of democracy and culture.

## **Quotes to Contemplate**

The Republican party no longer exists - it is now the Trump party. The other party in Washington is the Washington party, a uni-party, consisting of McConnell, Pelosi and the rest of mainstream Washington. - Doomberg

It's no longer left vs right. It's innovators vs establishment. - Mario Nawfal

## > Primary Ideas in This Week's Post

The classic view of the political world as being divided into Democrats and Republicans is incorrect. As we have been discussing for the last several years, both parties are morphing into different realities compared with their historical contexts. Taking a larger view, Jason Steinhauer, in his excellent Substack article reproduced at the bottom of this post, calls Biden's defeat the end of the 20th century and the beginning of a new world order.

2025 should include greater degrees of chaos and conflict, compared with 2024. Although the system is unstable and vulnerable to shock, 2025 should be a year when things more or less hold together. Watch out for black swans.

## > Happy New Year

Thanks for taking this journey with me and providing great comments and insights. I am looking to sharing 2025 with you. Following are some contemplations for your consideration.

We are in the 17th year of the Fourth Turning, which should last 20-30 years - more or less in the middle. We have to remember that these things progress gradually and then suddenly, so we have not yet gotten to the suddenly bit.

The way to bet is that 2025 will contain higher-than-average chaos, but nothing extraordinarily interesting.

At the same time, we have to remember that you do not plan on or anticipate black swans. Paranoia is an entirely acceptable and appropriate response.

In the grand scheme of things, 2024 was a pretty good year, as long as you were not in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria ...

The economy in the US continued to prosper, given its continuing artificial high on debt. This will all come to a bad end, but probably not in 2025. In 2025, the foundations should continue to shake, but also continue to hold. Having said that, 2025 could be the year that the US becomes unable to fund its debt and deficits without the use of even more-extraordinary tactics, which could be the trigger for the "suddenly" phase of change.

At some point, Trump's dramatic actions and attempts at dramatic action will begin to generate active pushback and conflict. I am amazed that Antifa and others reacted so passively to Trump's election. They have not gone anywhere.

Germany, having made a series of extraordinarily stupid decisions on energy, is heading toward economic pain.

Most of the Western world is deciding to throw the bums out, politically - mostly by moving to the right, remembering that right means different things in different places. Argentina made an extraordinary move by electing Milei. He is wreaking havoc, doing mostly correct things. However, given the extreme dysfunction in its economy, the amount of disruption and pain may turn out to be too much medicine for people to take in one sitting. What a grand and wonderful experiment!

Inflation is creeping in everywhere. While we are walking on a precipice, 2025 should be the year when inflation begins to increase at a relatively steady pace.

Wokeness arguably reached its peak in 2024. It will never go away and will morph into other forms, but the nasty, virulent bits will probably continue to die down.

Humans come in many flavors and sizes and touchy-feely liberals will be with us always - for better and for worse.

The economic slowdown during the first part of the year should be minor, but every slowdown presents the opportunity for something bigger.

In a particularly promising trend, cities are beginning to throw out councils and DAs that refused to enforce the law. Some places, California comes to mind, have decided that their experiments with lenient laws did not produce the results they had hoped for, and had injected anarchy into the culture, instead. They are changing the laws.

Even *The Atlantic* noted that "New York City Has Lost Control of Crime."

You recall that I see many social trends as viral infections that bloom and then die off, leaving some change - positive and negative - in their wakes. I think ... I hope that the fever on hysterical wokeness has broken.

Some of the most disturbing trends that I see are young people withdrawing from life - not getting driver's licenses, having much less sex ... These are not traits on which to build a robust culture or future.

I have simplistically boiled our cultural rot down into three principal causes beyond the overall decline in the tone, tenor and quality of our culture: the determination that words can be violent, identity politics and the ubiquity of social media, which, among other things, creates echo chambers and amplifies words. These trends are healing at the edges, but we have a long, long way to go. It is also my strong opinion that we have to let it go - we have to let differences, particularly of opinion, be ok.

A long, long way to go. Given the indoctrination of younger generations, it may take generations to get this whole disease out of our culture.

But, maybe we have made a start.

On other fronts, and speaking of diseases, we need to watch out for bird flu, which is on the verge of being a huge problem.

Going around the world:

WRT China, my two, primary themes continue:

1. China will probably not invade Taiwan and will simply, peacefully integrate it over the coming years. My concern is that the US would provoke a confrontation that no one else wants (yes, I have become that cynical).

2. The trade war could get ugly because of the materials and parts the US depends on that China provides. In addition, they could make it very hard on US companies in China.

Trump will go after China and China will react. Maybe there is an agreement in there, somewhere, but this is a prescription for much mischief before any agreement is reached.

Ukraine - I have said from the beginning of the war that Russia should win. In a war of attrition, the country having the most bodies to sacrifice wins. There will be a significant amount of pressure from Trump for a ceasefire, and ultimately a settlement, but it is not clear what the bases for those agreements would be. To date, sanctions have had some effect on Russia, but, in the grand scheme of things, not much. Mostly because everyone, including the Europeans, is cheating. However, there is some evidence that sanctions are beginning to bite and war-weariness is beginning to set in.

Iran - The fall of Syria, the neutering of Hezbollah and the devastation of Hamas have diminished Iran significantly. The geopolitics of the Middle East are undergoing a major transformation. I have no idea how it is going to work out, but watch Turkey (Türkiye) and Saudi Arabia. The wild card is whether Israel/US decide to take out Iran's nuclear capabilities.

The rest of the world should have its usual ups and downs and conflicts and resolutions. Almost certainly, Canada and France will change governments. Germany is in the midst of a political mess, and the UK prime minister has a very low approval rating.

If you subscribe to the big (men) theory of history, then your eyes should remain on Trump, Putin and Xi. Russia is in the interesting position of being a second-rate country that has bountiful natural resources and nuclear weapons. China is going through one of the periodic ascensions it has gone through over the millennia. It is a very poor country with a layer of increasing excellence that will literally challenge the world. The US is in decline, but from a very powerful and resource-rich starting point. We will continue to evolve into a multipolar world, with countries like Poland, Turkey and perhaps Brazil attempting to become the second-tier players.

So, on one level 2025 will be a year like all years - ups, downs, wars, peace treaties. On another level, there are significant stresses and strains that are increasing as we continue our journey in our Fourth Turning toward a great reset.

Nothing for the average person to do, except to focus on friends and family and to keep the outside noise from impacting your quality of life.

2025 should be quite a ride.

Let's get after it.

## Markets

### Updated Charts

> No change in outlook.

> I have talked about how cutting short-term interest rates increases long-term interest rates because of increasing expectations of inflation. That is what we have seen in markets since the first rate cut.



### **So, You Say You Want A Revolution?**

> The Biden administration on Friday withdrew a pending regulation governing transgender athletes, abandoning an effort to provide some protections for transgender students that the incoming Trump administration has said it opposes.

> The administration also withdrew a proposal to cancel student debt for roughly 38 million Americans, which the Education Department said was due to “operational challenges.”

> A new *Financial Times* report has cited European officials who say Trump's team told them he plans to continue military aid to Kiev after his inauguration. He's reportedly trying to calm fears of an immediate US withdrawal of support, and this is connected to an expected Trump policy for NATO member states to increase defense spending to 5% of their GDP.

> There is an inherent tension between Musk's and Trump's view of the world. Musk wants to rein in government, whereas Trump wants to expand his range. All the things Trump promised during his campaign cost money.

*The Bee* - "Elon Is Controlling Trump" Complain People Controlling Biden.

- > We are still not serious - Sen. Rand Paul's amendment to raise the Social Security retirement age to 70 fails by a vote of 3-93.
- > This is correct

Donald Trump Established The Seven Steps Of Maximum Pressure

*You  
put  
here*

- **Step One: Ask For The Moon!** Open with maximalist goals that are bordering on fantasy (complete nuclear disarmament, in the case of his confrontation with Pyongyang).
- **Step Two: Whip Out Your Big... Button!** Follow up with "madman" behavior and overwhelming threats (the "big button" and "fire and fury" statements).
- **Step Three: Punch Someone In The Mouth!** Back up your maximalist threats with tactical and surgical strikes (drops MOAB in Afghanistan, far from North Korean theater but clear enough for everyone in Pyongyang to understand what Trump is demonstrating).
- **Step Four: Break Bread Make Friends!** Once credibility is established, start negotiations (instructs White House officials to begin planning the summit with North Korea).
- **Step Five: Leave The Bride At The Altar!** Just before a breakthrough in the negotiations, throw the whole process awry in a fit of irrational rage, causing negotiators to scramble to accommodate you (Trump cancels the summit in May 2018 for no apparent reason).
- **Step Six: Kiss And Make Up!** Sit down and negotiate (June 2018 Singapore Summit).
- **Step Seven: Make A Deal (And Proclaim It To Be The Greatest Deal Ever)!**

> Whew! The government did not shut down. A 1,500 page bill was reduced to 118 pages, with some of the most egregious stuff removed. The government is funded until March 2025. Trump did not get his wish that the debt ceiling limit be raised (or eliminated). It continues to include disaster aid funding, economic aid for farmers and funding the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Maryland. Excluded are reforms for pharmacy benefit managers, giving DC control over RFK Stadium, pay raises for lawmakers, limitation of investments in China, criminalizing revenge porn, funding for pediatric cancer research and reimbursing food stamp theft.

It seems like 1,500 pages would contain more than this, but there you are.

> Trump is after Panama for the high fees it charges for crossing the Canal.

> I think Andrew Sullivan has a point - from his *The Weekly Dish* on Substack - "One of the more remarkable attributes of our president-elect is his preternatural luck. It's not every candidate who gets to run against Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris. And it isn't every president who gets to pick three Supreme Court Justices, whose prosecutors are fantastically corrupt or inept, and who will return to power just as the huge infrastructure investment by his predecessor is beginning to filter through the economy, and as disinflation continues.

But in foreign affairs, Trump has in some ways hit the jackpot. As he contemplates regaining power, the two most devoted adversaries of the US — Russia and Iran — are in crisis. The sudden collapse of the hideous Alawite dictatorship in Syria has crippled Russia's interests in the Middle East and beyond, especially in Africa. Meanwhile, Israel's decimation of Hamas and Hezbollah in the wake of October 7 has pushed Iran into a humiliating and increasingly isolated defensive crouch. But it's with Russia that an opportunity now beckons. Yes, it's the economy, stupid. Militarily, the Kremlin has been sustaining minor momentum in the Donetsk region, and will likely consolidate some territorial gains before Trump's inauguration. But for the first time, after the disappointment of the last two years, the "crippling" economic

consequences of Western sanctions are beginning to limit Putin's ability to keep fighting indefinitely."

> Biden commutes death sentences for essentially all federal prisoners on death row to life in prison.

> Greenland is back on the table - Trump says US ownership is "an absolute necessity."

> Denali, the US's tallest mountain, used to be called Mt. McKinley, but was renamed its native name. Trump wants to go back to McKinley.

> Trump: "It Will Be the Policy of the United States That There Are Only Two Genders."

> The ethics report on Gaetz came out, and he is disgusting.

> The fight over the bill to keep the government running indicates Trump may have trouble in the House, particularly over money-related issues.

> Listening to a podcast by Doomberg and Grant Williams, two people for whom I have great respect, I was struck by their discussions about the extreme corruption of the US government. Williams is a Brit who travels the world all year and has a detached perspective. Politics all the time, everywhere, is corrupt to one extent or the other, but in a democracy, with notable exceptions, we generally keep it on a low boil. I have attributed most of our political dysfunction to incompetence, but I may have to revisit my assumptions.

> RFK Jr take note - Whooping cough cases in the U.S. hit their highest level in a decade. 32,000+ cases have been recorded this year so far — more than six times the total last mid-December.

> Trump wants much of the 2.3 million-person federal workforce back at their desks. Otherwise, "they're going to be dismissed."

## Short Takes

Word is, California is still counting ballots.

Just one of those things, or an omen? - United States F/A-18 Super Hornet shot down by a U.S. guided missile destroyer over the Red Sea.

UFO sightings? Anyone? Where have they gone?

> In the vein of my, some problems are unresolvable, theme - Muslims are marching in Germany demanding a caliphate. Camel's nose in the tent, and all of that.

> In New York City, an illegal immigrant set a sleeping woman on fire on the subway. There are pictures of two policemen just walking by, who made no response.



> Remember the necessity to hold two, contradictory thoughts in your head at the same time? Trump did break the law AND overzealous prosecutors were out to get him in any way they possibly could.

> EU boosts Russian LNG imports to record

## Miscellany

Nothing this week

### [History Club](#)

#### [The end of the 20th century](#)

The U.S. election ushers in a new world order

#### [Jason Steinhauer](#)

Nov 10, 2024

Many have asked for my thoughts on the U.S. elections. After taking time to reflect, my analysis is presented below. It's a long read, but I hope it offers some value as we chart a path forward for democracy, human rights and equality.

Biden was the last of the 20th century Presidents, an institutionalist who maintained that when we locked arms across the aisle or across the planet, we could solve our global challenges. Image from [ABC News](#), via Reuters.

On August 6 of this year, I appeared on [Polish television](#) and was asked who Kamala Harris would choose as her running mate. "Pennsylvania figures to be a crucially important state," I told the program host. "So, I would not be surprised if Vice President Harris opts to select the governor of Pennsylvania in order to try and sure up that critical state."

I was wrong; the next day Harris announced Tim Walz. And, I was wrong about the importance of Pennsylvania; had Harris won it, Trump still would have won the election by 67 electoral college votes.

That's because this election was not about one or two states. It was not about the "economy" or "inflation." Rather, this election marked the conclusion of a process whereby society re-organized itself, with one superstructure becoming permanently unwound and a new one crystallizing in its place. Such a process did not happen in

one day; it had been unfolding over the past decade. But Tuesday was the inflection point, the moment of no return.

Simply put, November 5, 2024, was the night the 20th century ended. Allow me to use this week's newsletter to articulate why I feel this way, and what we can do to shape our new world so that it reflects the values we hold dear.

I'm currently teaching a course on the Middle East, and in the course, I've suggested to my students that there was a "Long 19th Century." Even if the 19th century technically lasted from 1800 to 1900, I've suggested to my students that it actually began with the French Revolution in 1789, and ended with the conclusion of World War I and the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

The argument rests on the premise that centuries are not solely defined by dates, but also by the interconnected technologies, institutions and ideologies that shape people's decisions and world events. Those technologies, institutions and ideologies don't simply disappear when the calendar turns. (The challenges of December 1899 didn't end in January 1900). They remain in place until new events, new technologies, new people and new ideas slough off the old world and forge a new one.

The "Long 20th Century," then, began in 1920, emerging out of the wreckage of WWI. That war killed more than 20 million people, including men blown apart on the battlefield, entire communities slaughtered and starved, and a global population ravaged by disease. From the carnage emerged new nation-states born from dissolved empires (the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires all fell during the war), and a nascent belief (highly contested, of course) that such nations must cooperate within international structures in order to stave off the brutal horrors that humans were capable of. Nations, President Wilson wrote in his Fourteen Points, had intrinsic rights to "territorial integrity," and force should not be used to change their borders. Rather, countries should rely on open diplomacy to work through their challenges.

The idea failed; the League of Nations could not prevent the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s, including Japanese crimes in China and the genocide of Jews and Roma by the Nazis. But its ideals were reinvigorated after the Second World War—a conflict that killed more than 50 million people—and reconstituted in the United Nations and other multinational institutions such as the World Bank, World Health Organization and NATO.

Imperfect and flawed as they were—and always rife with agendas, politics and hypocrisies—these institutions played major roles in propagating a set of beliefs that animated society in the ensuing decades. Those beliefs included the assumption that institutional structures, when properly funded and supported, could advance diplomacy, education, medicine and, ultimately, peace. They sparked the creation of USAID, the growth of the State Department, public diplomacy, the field of international development, the Peace Corps, Doctors Without Borders and a network of global governmental and non-governmental organizations founded on complementary ideals. The institutions were often led by the United States and other

“Western” powers, but they were not relegated to them. In the Global South, for example, ideas of transnational solidarity for the purposes of peace, prosperity and economic development guided Pan-Arab and Pan-African movements, as well as the “Third World Project,” which attempted to build solidarity among nations that had formerly been colonized. As Indonesian statesman Sukarno said at the 1955 Bandung Conference, “We the 1.4 billion strong who are speaking with once voice can mobilize in favor of peace.”

These structures were undergirded by particular types of technologies. The technologies of the 20th century were mechanical and industrial, an orchestra of cogs, wheels, motors and engines. They were also big: large coal plants, giant oil rigs, huge freighters and airplanes, enormous newspaper presses, big factory floors, all churning and pumping in mechanized motions. This industrial arrangement allowed individual workers to be inserted into assembly lines and guide the machines, participating in the production (and consumption) of automobiles, consumer products, building materials, and physical electronics—creating massive amount of goods, massive amounts of wealth, and degrading the environment in planet-altering ways.

The model was linear, i.e., an assembly line with a beginning, middle and end. Those linear structures extended beyond industry to education and the workforce. School systems became assembly lines for students: enter in kindergarten, progress through a path of elevating grade levels, exit after high school. Universities and post-graduate studies were similar knowledge production factories, a metaphor used by the president of the University of California himself, Clark Kerr, in a 1963 speech and book that positioned the university as the centerpiece of the “knowledge industry” churning out PhDs and Masters degrees. As workers retired, new ones entered, a beautiful techno-educational machine in motion.

Large numbers of knowledge workers were necessary because the 20th century was built in an expert-centric manner. Subject matter experts staffed the growing diplomatic and international corps. Experts staffed the educational and academic ranks, who trained more experts to come after them. Expertise staffed the finance world, the corporate world, militaries, and governments. The scientific enterprise exploded, swelled with funding from governments and the private sector, embedding scientific experts across national security, the economy and healthcare. Even the mass media evolved into an expert-centric enterprise, with “reporters” morphing into “journalists” who gained prestige from their expertise in particular regions or subjects (think the award-winning Foreign Affairs Correspondent or the Senior Business Reporter). All of this was perpetuated by cycles of prizes and awards (Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, World Food Prizes, etc.) wherein experts and institutions lauded their own excellence among other experts and institutions.

Finally, all of this was documented and transmuted through linear media forms. Films had beginnings, middles and ends; newspapers had sections that started at A1 and were organized linearly through sections B, C, and D. To watch a movie in a theater

you were expected to arrive on time; to understand the end of a TV show you had to watch from the beginning. This is not meant to suggest the media landscape wasn't complex or guided by corporate interests; read Marshall McLuhan or watch the 1976 film *Network*. But the forms were linear, and with them semi-predictable patterns of how consumers would behave and interact.

Still, the 20th century did not avoid perpetual war and destruction. Beyond World War I and World War II, wars in the Middle East, genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, the massacre at Srebrenica, the Cultural Revolution in China, Soviet Imperialism, nuclear weapons, and environmental degradation all caused immense suffering. Yet, a belief persisted throughout the century—perhaps naively so—that expertise, diplomacy, institutions, global cooperative agreements and shared economic prosperity could keep humanity from destroying itself and the planet. The International Space Station, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Earth Day, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks... these were all transnational initiatives imbued with a 20th century logic that when we locked arms across the planet, we could devise solutions to our global challenges.

There was no single day where this logic came undone. Indeed, forces within the 20th century were fighting to undo it from the outset. Nothing in this argument is meant to suggest a uniformity of how 6 billion people lived from 1920 through the recent past. Still, as the calendar turned to 2000, this organizing principle held. After the terror attacks of 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5 and a case went forward to the United Nations that the U.S. would retaliate against the Taliban and, later, Saddam Hussein. In retrospect, the Iraq War likely represented the beginning of the end of this world, a calamitous conflict that killed tens-of-thousands, lobbied for by the very institutions and experts meant to advance peace and diplomacy: the United Nations, the New York Times, etc. Amid the tumult of the Iraq War came the global financial crisis, where again the institutions and experts meant to promote stability and prosperity—the World Bank, the Federal Reserve, large banks—failed to protect the everyday person, with nary an entity facing repercussions for the collapse.

Concomitant to these global shocks emerged three massively disruptive technological forces: social media, Silicon Valley and Bitcoin. The social Web—Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.—seized communicative power away from experts and the legacy press, while simultaneously flooding our information ecosystem with new media forms. The infinite scroll may go down in history as the most consequential invention of our time, which when integrated into the mobile phone and connected to the Internet meant that we could each consume user-generated media ad infinitum: never a beginning, never an end, never in a straight line. We would always enter in the middle of the feed and leave before the feed had completed, hopping around from destination to destination through a dizzying maze of content and

hyperlinks on devices designed to addict us and surveil us. Other media replicated the model: Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Apple TV became repositories of never-ending content serving up movie franchises such as Marvel or Star Wars that, themselves, never ended, an infinite scroll of interconnected stories, all powered by algorithms designed to keep us inextricably tethered to our screens.

This ecosystem privileged attention above all else, forging the incentives for staggering amounts of misinformation and disinformation. Accuracy mattered less amid millions of pieces of content every minute, for accuracy was no guarantee of visibility. What mattered was surprise, shock, subversion of expectations, defiance of standards and conventions... anything to attract eyeballs. The more eyeballs that could be attracted, the more power and influence could be gained, regardless of expertise or experience.

The technology that powered this new ecosystem was small, as opposed to large: small chips, small phones, small circuit boards, small batteries, laptops instead of desktops, wearable, disposable, portable and mobile. As always, our behaviors and tastes became more like the technologies we used: nimble and agile became preferred to static and durable. Why be tied to a permanent home, partner or career, when one could be portable, mobile, work remotely, and hop from job to job? Why be limited to a national currency when users could create their own virtual currencies that operated outside the confines of the existing financial system? Why allow the institutions of the past to set the boundaries of possibility when so many possibilities existed beyond those boundaries?

This sounds like a renaissance of freedom and liberty. But it's important to remember that this was occurring amid other structural changes, namely the displacement of jobs and the hollowing out of manufacturing communities. While the previous technologies created jobs, the new technologies were displacing them. That displacement was felt acutely among the working classes, and meant that the rapid proliferation of new technologies was inextricably intertwined with an anger towards the institutions that had failed to intervene. The expert-centric institutions had become over-burdened with bureaucracy, unconcerned with the plights of working people, and arrogantly tone-deaf, it was argued. (Billionaires flying on private jets to Davos for the World Economic Forum while the Swiss Alps melted in the background became, perhaps, the most iconic juxtaposition.) On both the Left and the Right, a belief grew that these institutions principally existed to perpetuate their own privilege, and that liberation lay in user-centric technology, radical activism, and strident self-reliance: I am my own brand, my own retirement plan, and my own media ecosystem. As Elon Musk recently posted on X, "You, the individual, are the media now." No institution can be more trustworthy than what I am able to know myself.

It is worth repeating that this unwinding took two decades to foment. If you read George Packer's masterful 2013 book [The Unwinding](#), you can see it taking shape. The Iraq War, the financial crisis, the Arab Spring, Brexit, Trump, the Rise of China,

social media, disinformation... all have contributed. But the breaking points were the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the expert-centric institutions of the 20th century was mass vaccination. In the previous century, polio outbreaks—such as in New York City in 1916—killed thousands of people and infected tens of thousands more. In a post-polio vaccine world, two of the three wild polio viruses were eradicated and mass vaccinations saved the lives of millions. Likewise, measles used to kill thousands of people per year in the U.S.; after the introduction of the vaccine, the number of reported cases dropped by 80 percent. Yet amid distrust in expert-centric institutions, massive disinformation, and a belief that no institution can be more trustworthy than what I can know myself, mass vaccination became, at best, a form of oppression, and at worst, a giant conspiracy. As I documented last year in an article for Real Clear Politics, [“In Europe, Disinformation is Winning,”](#) nearly 25% of Germans were never vaccinated against coronavirus. In Bulgaria the unvaccinated rate was nearly 70% and in North Macedonia it was near 60%.

On the heels of the pandemic came the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such an invasion flew in the face of President Wilson’s plea 100 years earlier for “territorial integrity” and open diplomacy. It placed NATO and the United Nations in a conundrum for which they have yet to devise a way out. Bring Ukraine into NATO and invoke Article 5—and risk nuclear war? Or send arms and funding, but place restrictions on how they can be used? Much like the League of Nations a century ago, the international institutions dedicated to preserving peace have been unable to stop the madman at the door intent on war.

President Biden was the last of the 20th century Presidents. A man whose Congressional career began in 1972, Biden came of age as an institutionalist. Despite all his flaws—and he had many—he held onto a 20th century logic that when we locked arms across the aisle or across the planet, we could devise solutions to our global challenges.

Ultimately, Biden was undone not by President-elect Trump, but by his own political party. The far-left flank had grown weary of his institutionalism, his careful diplomacy, his support for Israel, his reverence for old alliances and legacy structures. To quote one such activist who participated in his ouster, “I am ready to burn it all down.” Biden’s debate performance was an alibi for a plan that the ceasefire crowd had envisioned for much longer: something drastic to capture media attention and show the older generation that times had changed. Harris was viewed as the 21st century candidate—multiracial, female, Progressive, younger. But once in charge, she ran a campaign stuck in 20th century logic. As the former Chief of Staff to Nancy Pelosi, John Lawrence, noted in his reflection on the race, Harris resuscitated two key messages from earlier Democratic platforms: “we’re not going back” and giving

people a “hand up. “It was a clunker in 2012,” Lawrence wrote, “and didn’t inspire undecided voters any better this time around.”

Most critically, Harris stumbled where Trump thrived. Trump smartly seized every moment to become a meme for the infinite scroll of social media—dancing to “Y-M-C-A” or working at McDonald’s. He embraced Bitcoin, locked arms with anti-vaxxer RFK, Jr., eschewed the legacy press, gained favor with iconoclasts such as Joe Rogan and Elon Musk, and promised that the jobs “they” took away would return under his leadership. Trump and his campaign learned from 2016 and 2020 that the old political model was dead and a new one had emerged. The electorate was cynical, angry, irreverent, anti-establishment and self-absorbed, and he would reflect that back to them. The candidate who promised to “burn it all down” would be the one the voters would hoist up.

So, where does this leave us as we head into 2025 and beyond?

To some the devolution of one world and the remaking of another is a cause for mourning—and indeed, during the past week that has been evident across legacy media and elements of civil society. For others, however, the new world is a cause for celebration—and not just political celebration. I have received several emails this week from people I know and respect eager to unlock an age of innovation and advancement: self-driving cars, open-source AI, personalized AI agents and new treatments for cancer and disease. The thinking is that over-reaching government regulation and stale, bureaucratic institutions have held society back (an underrated element of the election is how Biden’s war against cryptocurrencies, waged through SEC Chief [Gary Gensler](#), factored into the anger felt by Trump supporters, Republicans and crypto-enthusiasts). The new generation of “bureaucracy-busters” such as the Trump-Musk coalition and Javier Milei in Argentina who will spur the renaissance society needs to unlock human flourishing.

Whether this is an opportunity or calamity, it is clear that democracy faces stiff headwinds in our new era. Freedom House has documented that in nearly every region of the world, democratic benchmarks are declining. Freedom of the press has been curtailed, those who oppose government are being jailed or murdered, corruption runs rampant, mass surveillance is being imposed, rights and liberties are being stripped, and wars are being waged that put civilians in harm’s way. Even in regions where democracy remains relatively strong—Europe, Australia, the U.S.—the liberal arts and humanities are being dismantled and disinformation and conspiracy theories run rampant (antisemitism, the world’s longest running conspiracy theory, has consumed Europe and the U.S. in the past year). Our new age is—for the moment—marked by cynicism, distrust, war, surveillance, conspiracy and stridency. Perhaps most ominously, it is marked by a distaste—even a disdain—for cooperation across political parties, religions, ethnicities, and nations.

So, what is the answer? Nostalgia will not redeem us; “the world has changed, and none of us can go back,” to quote Peggy Carter to Steve Rogers in the film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Our task now, in my humble opinion, is to carry forward our achievements from the previous era and ingrain them into our new one. We know that vaccines are overwhelmingly safe and effective; we must continue to embrace them in order to safeguard public health. We know that our planet is warming beyond what humans and animals can inhabit; we must use our technology and international alliances to stem the damage before it is too late. We know that humans are capable of horrific crimes and abuses, so we must invest in education that protects our most vulnerable populations and promotes peace and tolerance. And we know that left to its own devices, a market without any regulation will create vast inequality, enriching a small few while leaving the vast majority behind. Smart policy frameworks that reward innovation, promote job creation, allow people to invest in their own education and up-skilling, provide affordable child and elderly care, strengthen the humanities, and offer a safety net for those facing hardship are all necessary to prevent millions from falling so far through the cracks that it becomes impossible to recover.

But our biggest task is to plug compassion, tolerance, peace, human rights, equal opportunity and democracy into a technological, political and media reality that often promote the opposite. This need has been apparent for some time, yet perhaps we did not insist upon it forcefully enough, thinking (naively) that the 20th century models could still endure even amid seismic shifts. It is time to recommit to these values, and I know, for my sake, there is much that I can do, including a rebranding of this newsletter, a reinvigoration of the History Communication Institute, forcefully combatting antisemitism and hate, and spreading the message of historical and media literacy farther than it has currently reached.

These are big responsibilities, but I owe a debt to the past and the future to undertake them. I hope you’ll join me.

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