

James Carroll

Preventing a race in space

As World War I broke out, Henry James identified an inexorable current that had been running below international events, leading to the "monstrous scene" of August as its grand Niagara.

Below the glassy upriver surface, the swift tide had been driven by habits of mind, arms-merchant greed, imperial hubris, and a politics that was wholly inadequate. At the deadly cascade, nations tumbled into the most violent century in history.

The writer Jonathan Schell cites the Niagara metaphor to define the still running momentum of war.

But as James wrote, humans stood on another threshold. Wars had always been fought on land and sea, but then new technologies of flight carried combat into the realm above.

Airborne weapons transformed killing. Indeed, air force was the invention that made 20th century warfare catastrophic. In looking back on that development, is it only naïve to ask if governments could have agreed to ban weapons in the air? What if the dropping of bombs from the newfangled aeroplane had been outlawed? The mind reels to think of it.

A century later, the human race stands at an equivalent threshold, and a version of that exact question is indeed being asked.

Can weapons be banned from outer space? Or will the Niagara current of defense contractor greed, imperial hubris, and inadequate politics carry the destructiveness of war into the "fourth battlefield" of the very cosmos?

That is the question that has been asked at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva for the last six years. Not by Washington.

How many Americans know that the nation refusing to discuss a treaty aimed at preventing an arms race in outer space is their own? Indeed, the United States, in various Pentagon documents published during the Bush administration, is explicit in aiming to put weapons in space — lasers, directed energy weapons, kinetic kill vehicles. The U.S. Space Command, in its "Vision for 2020," plans for "counterspace operations." The already deployed missile defense system is a first step toward an anti-

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satellite capability, giving the Pentagon control of the "high frontier."

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences recently published "Russian and Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Plans in Space," a stark look at where the American project is taking the world. The academy was instrumental half a century ago in creating the arms control regime that enabled the Cold War to end nonviolently.

Now it warns that "U.S. space weaponization plans would have potentially disastrous effects on international security and the peaceful uses of space."

Russia and China have insisted in Geneva that a treaty banning such weapons is urgently needed. Failing that, neither nation sees a choice but to respond — Russia by extending its aging ballistic missile forces, and China by readying a space weapons program of its own. Last week, for the first time since the Soviet era, missiles were paraded through Red Square. Last year, China fired the warning shot of a first anti-satellite missile test.

How is the crucial question of weapons in outer space being considered in America?

As the quadrennial political conversation of the presidential primaries was moving into gear last February, the Pentagon announced its intention to send a missile into space to shoot down a "wayward satellite," supposedly to protect earth from its unspent fuel. Many observers — certainly including Chinese and Russians — questioned whether this was not, in fact, a step toward anti-satellite weaponry?

If Henry James were alive, wouldn't he have recognized an upshift in the current toward Niagara?

Yet neither the presidential candidates, nor the pundits and moderators who yap at them, saw in this event anything to discuss. The missile was fired, the satellite destroyed. No big issue. The world-historic decision about carrying warfare across the last threshold into outer space is being left to defense contractors, military commanders, and their wholly owned subsidiary on Capitol Hill. Not since August 1914 has politics seemed so irrelevant.

Humans who did not think to ban weapons from the air a century ago know better when it comes to outer space. Yet what are we doing? If the deadly current is still hidden, what is that low rumble that can be heard, rolling toward us from down the river?

The Boston Globe



By Chappatte in Le Temps (Geneva), Globe Cartoon

David Brooks

Neural Buddhists

In 1996, Tom Wolfe wrote a brilliant essay called "Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died," in which he captured the militant materialism of some modern scientists.

To these self-confident researchers, the idea that the spirit might exist apart from the body is just ridiculous. Instead, everything arises from atoms. Genes shape temperament. Brain chemicals shape behavior. Assemblies of neurons create consciousness. Free will is an illusion. Human beings are "hard-wired" to do this or that. Religion is an accident.

In this materialist view, people perceive God's existence because their brains have evolved to confabulate belief systems. You put a magnetic helmet around their heads and they will begin to think they are having a spiritual epiphany. If they suffer from temporal lobe epilepsy, they will show signs of hyper-religiosity, an overexcitement of the brain tissue that leads sufferers to believe they are conversing with God.

Wolfe understood the central assertion contained in this kind of thinking: Everything is material and "the soul is dead." He anticipated the way the genetic and neuroscience revolutions would affect public debate. They would kick off another fundamental argument over whether God exists.

Lo and behold, over the past decade, a new group of assertive atheists has done battle with defenders of faith. The two sides have argued about whether it is reasonable to conceive of a soul that survives the death of the body and about whether understanding the brain explains away or merely adds to our appreciation of the entity that created it.

The atheism debate is a textbook example of how a scientific revolution can change public culture. Just as "The Origin of Species" reshaped social thinking, just as Einstein's theory of relativity affected art, so the revolution in neuroscience is having an effect on how people see the world.

Yet my guess is that the atheism debate is going to be a sideshow. The cognitive revolution is not going to end up undermining faith in God, it's going end up challenging faith in the Bible.

Over the past several years, the momentum has shifted away from hardcore materialism. The brain seems less like a cold machine. It does not operate

like a computer. Instead, meaning, belief and consciousness seem to emerge mysteriously from idiosyncratic networks of neural firings. Those squishy things called emotions play a gigantic role in all forms of thinking. Love is vital to brain development.

Researchers now spend a lot of time trying to understand universal moral intuitions. Genes are not merely selfish, it appears. Instead, people seem to have deep instincts for fairness, empathy and attachment.

Scientists have more respect for elevated spiritual states. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that transcendent experiences

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other.

can actually be identified and measured in the brain (people experience a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe, which orients us in space). The mind seems to have the ability to transcend itself and merge with a larger presence that feels more real.

This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead it will lead to what you might call neural Buddhism.

If you survey the literature (and I'd recommend books by Newberg, Daniel J. Siegel, Michael S. Gazzaniga, Jonathan Haidt, Antonio Damasio and Marc D. Hauser if you want to get up to speed), you can see that certain beliefs will spread into the wider discussion.

First, the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships. Second, underneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions. Third, people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. Fourth, God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, the unknowable total of all there is.

In their arguments with Christopher

Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the faithful have been defending the existence of God. That was the easy debate. The real challenge is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits. It's going to come from scientists whose beliefs overlap a bit with Buddhism.

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other. That's bound to lead to new movements that emphasize self-transcendence but put little stock in divine law or revelation. Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. They're going to have to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day.

I'm not qualified to take sides, believe me. I'm just trying to anticipate which way the debate is headed. We're in the middle of a scientific revolution. It's going to have big cultural effects.

MEANWHILE ■ Sigrídur Vídis Jónsdóttir

Iceland! Read all about it!

BARCELONA Iceland's hot economy can't escape downturn." It was when I was strolling by a book shop in Barcelona and noticed the headline in the International Herald Tribune that I realized something had changed.

I picked up the paper. Not only was my country in the news again, but the news was big enough to make it onto the front page.

You would be surprised, too, if you came from a country of only 300,000. Once, Iceland had simply slipped out of existence every time I went abroad. Now, here I was actually reading about it on foreign soil.

Oh, and apparently my currency was collapsing. The economic boom in Iceland, the financial miracle of late, was coming to an end!

It wasn't so much the financial meltdown that intrigued me, but the fact that my country was getting attention. And that it was negative attention this time: The Icelandic financial miracle was coming to an end.

What had happened to the good old days when Icelanders were praised for electing the first female president in the world? Or when Surtsey Island appeared from the ocean in a volcanic eruption and cute stories about the sweet, little country made it around the globe?

After each of those events, the foreign media packed its bags and left.

Now, with the story of the financial collapse, there was neither a clear end, nor could we control the narrative. Foreigners were talking and writing about us, and there was nothing we could do about it.

I should have seen it coming. Already before, living in Britain, I had noticed that my usual answers to the usual questions — northern lights, geothermal energy, the singer Björk (was she an Eskimo? Was I?) — no longer worked.

Suddenly I was supposed to answer questions about banks and the economy. How come you're buying up Britain now? Why are your banks getting so big? I had no clue.

Gone were the days when I could babble about things like how the Web

site of Íslendingabok (the Book of Icelanders) enables us to check how closely related we are to one another. Attempts to gently shift the conversation back to familiar clichés — the midnight sun and elves — were nothing more than efforts to cover-up the fact that I didn't understand how Icelandic investors had managed to buy shares in companies all over the world.

The headlines were all about invasions and Vikings. The British media would ask how on earth a country with a "population the same as Doncaster" could be buying up Britain.

In turn, the Icelandic media would write about the foreign media reports. "Financial Times discusses Björgólfur Thor!" (— my fifth cousin, according to the Book of Icelanders). "Jon Asgeir in the Wall Street Journal!" (my eighth cousin).

It was new, it was strange — but it was fun.

While reading that article in Barcelona, and frantically searching

What happened to the cute stories about elves, northern lights and Björk?

through others, I realized that the strong and fearless Viking had been downgraded.

Now, Iceland resembled a "canary in a coal mine, signaling crises in toxic economies." Some even started to believe that the Icelandic currency — the krona — had been under siege by hedge funds and speculators who were trying to drive down Icelandic markets so they could make a quick profit.

Iceland — of all places — was a "leading indicator" for a looming global downturn.

My cool, wanna-be-taken-seriously country did not look much like a winner anymore. It was being described as a "rugged, windswept island that has always veered between famine and feast."

But then, this did sound kind of exotic: Wasn't the alien little Viking tribe that one day decided to leave its rugged, little Reykjavik and conquer its neighbors now fighting a bloody battle against unyielding businessmen?

What about that famine?

Sigrídur Vídis Jónsdóttir is a journalist in Reykjavik.

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While calling another galaxy is still something you'll see only in films, as far as telecommunications on earth are concerned, what used to be science fiction has now become fact. Most of us think nothing about picking up a device and making a direct connection to anywhere in the world, anytime. We have video, data and telephony, and an unbelievable range of products and services. Our mobile phones — probably the most ubiquitous piece of equipment in the history of information and communication technology (ICT) — allow us to be available 24/7. However, as this year's World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) will make clear, there is still plenty of room for further development.

The WTISD is celebrated each year on May 17, the date of the official founding of ITU (International Telecommunication Union) and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in 1865. ITU is the organization behind an untold number of telecommunication standards, agreements and largely the force behind the interoperability of the worlds' ICT companies (among its many tasks, ITU is also responsible for the fair distribution of the global radio spectrum; an increasingly challenging role as more and more services line up to take advantage of this limited resource).

Each year a theme is chosen and ITU's global members are invited to participate in discussions and exchange best practices, with many countries holding their own WTISD events and celebrations. The sharing of ideas and exchange of information from all over the world form an important impulse for revising or creating new standards and recommendations to both governments and industry alike. This year the WTISD is focusing on inclusion and accessibility. Taking place in Cairo, Egypt, the theme is: Connecting Persons with Disabilities — ICT Opportunities for All.

The theme is one that fits perfectly with ITU's vision of "universal access". The concept of the "Digital Divide" between the Haves and the Have-nots, is not merely a question of rich vs. poor. This year's WTISD will create more awareness about the fact that a large percentage of the world's population currently is barred access from enjoying the same kind of services and opportunities as the rest. ITU wants to change this through more inclusive standardization, smarter design and more enlightened policies.

Ultimately, a greater focus on accessibility benefits us all. Many of the standards that we now take for granted — resizable text and touch sensitive keyboards/pads, for example — began life as assistive technologies. With an estimated 10 percent of the world's population living with a disability, this is by no means a fringe issue. And with current trends in population growth, medical advances and an increasingly greying population, this percentage is likely to increase. Fortunately, there is growing support for this issue. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the field of ICT had the highest number of signatories ever for a UN Convention on its opening day.

So, after May 17 of this year, perhaps E.T. can stand for "Equitable Telephony", for many an even more exciting concept than an interplanetary call.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hillary and white men

Susan Faludi observes that Hillary Clinton's pugnacious political combat of late has been successful with white male voters ("The fight stuff," Views, May 10). She draws two conclusions: that Clinton's success with a more-typically male strategy has "remade the political world for future female politicians," and that we are witnessing some sort of sea change in the long-held views of white males about American women politicians.

While the first point may have some merit, there is little evidence to support the second. Clinton's success with white male voters may say more about their rejection of her rival than it about their acceptance of some new, more aggressive model of female politician.

Numerous news analyses have documented white male voters' antipathy to aspects of Barack Obama's personality and policies. Many of these men think that he is elitist and out of touch with their values.

Who is to say how Clinton would fare with white men against a different type of opponent?

For an alternative point of view, one need look no further than your editorial on Clinton's campaign ("Hillary Clinton and the campaign," May 10). "Win or lose," it says, "Clinton's reputation will suffer more harm than it already has," from this strategy. This approach needs to change, the editorial concludes, "if she hopes to have any shot at winning the nomination or preserving her integrity."

Time will tell if the path that Hillary Clinton has forged will create more opportunities or obstacles for female politicians. But for now, the evidence is weak.

Martin D. Hirsch
Basel, Switzerland

'Spreading' democracy

Michael Auslin's argument in "Japan's balancing act" (Views, May 8) is indicative of the mind-set that exists in the Bush administration. He suggests that Japan needs to play a role in spreading liberal institutions. However, these "liberal institutions" are defined by Washington. As U.S. President John Quincy Adams once said, it is not America's role to spread democracy but to wish it well.

The same applies to Japan or any other democratic nation. Japan's role should be defined by Japan, not Washington.

Robert M. Orr, Kamakura, Japan

Israel at 60

Any student of the Israel-Palestinian conflict knows that both sides have committed numerous injustices. Re-counting them and all the errors everyone made is a way to prolong the conflict rather than resolve it. In terms of conflict resolution, "history" and "right" are meaningless. Conflict resolution cannot correct history.

The only relevant question is whether both sides want to make peace now, or live in the past heaping historical injustice upon injustice until the wall of animosity is so high it cannot be surmounted. Or maybe that has already occurred.

Michael Greenwald, Bangkok

Israel must find the leadership to write a new chapter for the nation's history. A new nation must emerge — embracing Jews, Arabs, Palestinians and Christians — with a new flag, free of religious attachments; a country that is humane to all. Indeed, a new Judea.

Juan Jose Berenguer-Testa
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