

2005

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed

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Recommended Citation

Seal, Thomas E. and Diamond, Jared (2005) "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 58 : No. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss4/13>

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bin Laden did not create it nor will his death or incarceration end it”—he has been a “peripheral player in modern Islamic militancy.” Al-Qa’ida is bigger and different from Bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. The word denotes a purpose, not an organization.

Throughout the book, Burke weaves a personal narrative drawing from his experiences on the ground and upon a deep understanding of international terrorism. He argues, “contemporary Islamic militancy is a diverse and complex historical phenomenon.” It is driven by local political grievances, economic frustration, and government repression.

Burke’s two-year-old assertion that al-Qa’ida is more of an ideology than a group is gaining currency and is now more widely accepted within the U.S. government. The Defense Department has now defined “countering ideological support for terrorism,” or CIST, as a major component of its strategy in the global war on terrorism. In order to win this war, it is simply not enough to protect the homeland, neutralize terrorists, and eliminate terrorist safe havens. Rather, the goal is to create the conditions that prevent terrorism from becoming an international threat. As such, the Bush administration’s efforts to promote democracy and eliminate tyranny are seen as the means to establish pluralism and to provide opposition groups a nonviolent venue to express grievances. In many authoritarian countries today, there are few options for peaceful regime change. Burke’s travels and interviews led him to the conclusion that “as national Islamic movements, moderate or violent, are crushed or fail, anger is channeled into

the symbolic realm and into the international, cosmic, apocalyptic language of bin Laden and his associates.”

Burke’s work adds to the Defense Department’s effort to analyze, by deconstructing al-Qa’ida, what motivates radical terrorist groups and understand why the United States is increasingly a target. For Burke, “the world is a far more radicalized place now than it was prior to September 11th.” It is the freelance operators without obvious connection to any group who should worry us the most; without a peaceful way to resolve their perceived injustice, they resort to violence.

The distance from 9/11, counterterrorism successes with international partners, and the lack of additional attacks in the United States allow for a more thoughtful debate on why the United States is perceived negatively in the world and how local conditions spawn terrorist movements. For those who are ready for the answers, Burke’s book is a good place to start. He not only corrects conventional misunderstandings of al-Qa’ida but offers a good representation of the radicalism the United States is attempting to contain.

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Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking, 2005. 525pp. \$29.95

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond, professor of geology at UCLA, used a blend of history, archaeology, geography, and anthropology to explain how Western civilizations rose to dominance. In *Collapse*,

Diamond uses the same approach to explore what causes some civilizations to fall into ruin while others survive or prosper. This second volume is perhaps more important in that it goes right to the heart of today's global war on terrorism and to steps that the West can take to minimize the potential for catastrophic failure, not only in the developing world but in the West itself.

Diamond contends that the collapse ("drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time") of many past societies is tied to unintended ecological suicide. He tracks this idea through a number of case studies, including the failed Polynesian cultures on Easter Island and in the southwest Pacific, the Anasazi and Mayan civilizations in the Americas, and the Viking colony on Greenland. His analysis includes lists of environmentally based causes, and decisions that societies either made or failed to make that ultimately determined their fate. He then traces these same ideas to today's world and hazards some projections into the future.

This process of ecocide is measured in eight interrelated categories: deforestation and habitat destruction; soil erosion, salinization, etc.; poor water management; overhunting; overfishing; the introduction of harmful alien species; population growth; and the increased per capita impact of people. Historically these categories have worked in tandem over time to produce collapse. This was true even in situations where conditions were not inherently catastrophic. A case in point is the demise of the Norse civilization in medieval Greenland. The Vikings' once-thriving colony died out, clinging to a maladapted

cultural heritage to the last. As the Vikings' society withered, their Inuit neighbors survived by adapting to the changing climate wrought by the mini Ice Age of the Middle Ages.

Diamond also notes the recent emergence of four new categories that add to the concern: climate change caused by humans, the buildup of toxic chemicals in the environment, energy shortages, and full human utilization of the earth's photosynthetic capacity. Diamond's discussion of these points tends to the esoteric, but several points are clear. Global warming, degradation of soils and fishing grounds through toxic poisoning, and decreasing availability of reasonably affordable energy are real problems. More importantly, they are part of a larger issue—that of the earth's capacity to sustain a growing population striving to achieve first-world status. The global, political, and social strains of billions of people aspiring to consume resources on a scale equaling that of Western societies is bound to be disruptive.

Diamond recognizes that there is more to the problem of collapse than that. No radical "tree hugger," Diamond is neither narrow-minded nor anti-business. He takes a broad look at a variety of contributing factors, including climatic change, hostile neighbors, declining support from friendly neighbors, and most importantly, a society's response to environmental degradation.

By way of illustration, Diamond opens with a case study of Montana. Once one of the wealthiest states, Montana is now among the poorest. This change flowed from multiple factors: deforestation, pollution from mining, introduction of foreign plant and fish species, loss of soil fertility and productivity, and

degradation and shortage of water. Diamond points also to a growing disparity between the super-rich flocking in to enjoy the scenery and the economically distressed local population whose means of livelihood are being eroded, and the political tensions that inevitably result.

This same confluence of problems, many coming as a result of conscious decisions on the part of leaders or citizens, is being played out across the globe. One would expect Africa, the perennial loser in such comparisons, to hold the anchor position as the continent most likely to fail. Not so. Australia heads the list, due to the legacy of aggressive importation of harmful species; government policies that promote and reward deforestation and soil ruination; destruction of aquatic habitats needed for sustainable fisheries; and other problems. Diamond opines that these conditions are not irreversible but that the continent's sustainable population is probably around eight million, somewhat less than half its current level. While one may question the exactitude of the eight-million figure, his case of overpopulation in relation to sustainability over time is well made, at least in terms of capacity for food production.

Turning to Africa, Diamond offers an instructive analysis of the Rwandan genocide. Taking a Malthusian view over the more common Hutu-versus-Tutsi source of disruption, he demonstrates how a complex mixture of poverty, fear, and opportunism, not tribal affiliation, drove the genocide. In the final analysis it all came down to land. As the population exceeded the land's ability to sustain it, the traditional fabric of Rwandan society was ripped apart. This

situation was exploited by government, tribal, and even religious leaders who turned the destitute against the merely poverty stricken. The result was the mass murder of people who had some land by those who had none.

For all the apparent doom and gloom, Diamond is cautiously optimistic about the future. Despite past failures, there are too many stories of societies successfully adapting to changing circumstances for us to despair. Technology can also contribute to success, though we are wise not to consider advances as a panacea. As to the importance of turning things around, he notes that today's terrorists may be well educated and moneyed but argues that "they still depend on a desperate society for support and toleration." He further notes, "well nourished societies, offering good job prospects . . . don't offer broad support to their fanatics." Perhaps it is this angle, if not that of survival itself, that holds the greatest interest for today's national security community.

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George, Roger Z., and Robert D. Kline, eds. *Intelligence and the National Security Strategist: Enduring Issues and Challenges*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ. Press, 2004. 564pp. \$150

The current climate of reform and blame affecting the intelligence community can deflect attention from its substance and value as a contributor to policy and military operations. Lost in the shuffle of reorganization and finger-pointing are issues that will consistently remain important challenges—matters of defining and improving analysis,