Chapter 16

The Tumultuous
Twenty-first Century:
Turbulence and Uncertainty

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It is obvious to even the most casual observer that we are in the midst of transformations so broad and comprehensive that they are revolutionizing the world in which we live, think, work, play, and pray—as never before in human history. The physical, intellectual, and social world we inhabit has changed more—faster and more often—in the past century than in the previous twenty thousand years. The ground is still shifting under us as relentless technological progress in the postindustrial world, coupled with social changes, as diverse as redefinition of the value and nature of work; the changing roles of men and women and changes in the nature of the family; the distribution of wealth; and the attitude toward others not of our racial group, all combine to radically alter the way we think and act. In so-called advanced societies, such as that of the United States, stress levels are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as we separate the rhythms of our life from those of nature. Perhaps it is only to be expected that in the face of such persistent change and the lack of firm and unchangeable anchors that provide needed stability and constancy we see such alarming levels of depression, anxiety,

violence, and hedonism. One example will illustrate my point: changes in the family, which, in this and many other lands, is under continuous and determined attack.

The family in America and elsewhere is not only changing under the pressures, but it is also becoming weaker. Two notable trends of the past generation—the rapid increase in divorce rates and out-of-wedlock childbearing—are particularly indicative of the weakened state of the family. Other danger signs include a decrease in the two-parent family as the traditional setting in which most children are raised; a decrease of the influence of the extended family; the documented impact of fatherlessness on a multitude of social problems—ranging from crime to domestic violence against women; increased numbers of latchkey children, both of whose parents work outside the home; competitive demands from a variety of community and school activities, which weaken family cohesiveness; and aggressive, well-financed attempts to legitimize same-sex unions, according them all of the rights, powers, and privileges that have since time immemorial been restricted to marriage between a man and a woman.

Another transformation, unlike any other in our history, is changing our world. A new international system, that of globalization, is replacing the Cold War system. Unlike the Cold War system, which froze the world into static competing blocks for nearly half a century, globalization is a dynamic, ongoing process. Globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before, in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and countries to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before and in a way that is producing a powerful backlash against those who are being left behind or victimized by this new system. Recent violent demonstrations at the G-8 meetings in Genoa (July 2001) were fueled by the anger and fear felt by millions around the world who sense, increasingly, that they are held captive by changes they neither understand nor embrace.

Globalization is not all smiles and sunshine. It has a number of potentially disastrous downsides as well. When the infection of financial panic spreads in a globalized world—and it can do so literally overnight, as the Asian flu of the late 1990s showed—it causes ripples, even tidal waves, across the whole global system.

I think it is not improbable that globalization, by raising both fears and expectations, may contribute to the development of what Robert D. Kaplan terms "the coming anarchy." In a bleakly realistic and frankly frightening collection of essays, which provides "a refreshing corrective to the dogma of globalization," Kaplan points out that the glaring global reality "is not that we [in the U.S.] are becoming like the Third World, but rather that they have so little chance of becoming like us."[1]

Kaplan uses West Africa to illustrate the worldwide demographic, environmental, and social stresses occurring in our "brave new world"—a world in which criminal anarchy emerges as the paramount danger for the future. Disease, overpopulation, crime and violence, scarcity of resources, environmental degradation, migration of refugees fleeing ethnic cleansing, tribalism with its concomitant erosion and instability of nation-states, the empowerment of private armies, and inept and corrupt governments—all portend the dangers that will soon confront our civilization in the West. Sad to say, West Africa is reverting to the Africa of the nineteenth century—a series of coastal trading posts (Accra, Kinshasa, Lagos, Monrovia, and others) and an interior that again is becoming unexplored and off-limits to foreigners. As national boundaries in Africa continue to erode, a more impenetrable boundary is being formed—the barrier of disease, which threatens to separate Africa and other parts of the Third World from more developed regions of the globe. Each year, there are three hundred to five hundred million clinical cases of malaria worldwide, 90 percent of which occur

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1. Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2000).

in Africa, and each year an estimated one million African children die from that ancient scourge. A dramatic example of the ravages of disease is provided by the AIDS epidemic—a scourge of medieval proportions, which is leaving a whole generation of African children without parents. Some twelve million African children already have been left as orphans, innocent victims of the AIDS epidemic. Some six thousand African children are dying from AIDS daily. Millions of people are being infected each year with the HIV virus; nearly all will die from AIDS.

Through 1999, 450,000 people in North America had died from AIDS, but in sub-Saharan Africa the figure was 13,700,000. The percentage of adults ages fifteen to forty-nine already infected with the AIDS virus is as high as 30 percent in several African countries—more than one hundred times the rate in the United States. Half of South African boys age fifteen will not live to age thirty. Uganda has the dubious honor of having the highest number of AIDS orphans in the world: 1.1 million in all; in some districts in Uganda one-third of all children are orphans. Destitute African orphans, most of whom end up on the streets, turn to prostitution or violence. None among us can be oblivious to or unconcerned about this terrible tragedy as AIDS tightens its death grip on a whole continent. Despite naively optimistic assertions to the contrary, there seems little reason to believe that meaningful remedies to the current AIDS epidemic will or even can be found and applied on a broad scale in Africa over the next decade or more. And if AIDS establishes a firm lodgment in the villages of Southeast Asia, as seems likely, today's epidemic could become a veritable maelstrom of death worldwide.

Kaplan asserts, and I fear he may be right, that "Africa may be as relevant to the future character of world politics as the Balkans were a hundred years ago, prior to the two Balkan wars and the First World War."[2] A century ago, Kaplan notes, the threat was the collapse of empires and the birth of nations based solely on tribe. Now,

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2.   Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy*, 18.

the threat is nature run amok, with all that implies in terms of environmental scarcity, disease, cultural and racial clashes, and war.

Indeed, Kaplan is of the view that the environment—broadly described—will be *the* national security interest of the early twenty-first century worldwide. Surging populations, deforestation, soil erosion, scarcity of fresh water, climatic change, and the probability of rising sea levels in critically overcrowded regions such as the Nile Delta and Bangladesh will trigger potentially cataclysmic events which initiate and sustain group conflict. In the twenty-first century, freshwater will be in dangerously short supply in such diverse locales as Saudi Arabia, Australia, Central Asia, and the western U.S., including California. The Ogalalla aquifer, which for more than a century has provided groundwater for the Great Plains of the U.S., is drying up. As this proceeds, it will only accentuate major demographic shifts already occurring in that part of the continent. Further north, the Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan already has fewer people than in 1905. Wars over water, whether in the Nile or in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, seem a likely possibility. In July 2001 the Canadian prime minister, Jean Chretien, proclaimed that Canada's abundant freshwater supplies are not for sale to the United States at any price. How sustainable that assertion will be in the long run is problematic at best.

Another great environmental issue, the availability of energy supplies, also will pose immense difficulties over the next century. Unless some other cost-effective source can be found in the form of fusion reactors, solar energy conversion, fuel cells, wind energy, or something else, humanity will continue to drive its technology, lifestyle, and growth with fossil fuels. The willingness of technologically advanced countries to go to war over oil supplies has been demonstrated within the last decade, and the potential for future conflicts remains very high indeed.

Increasing deficits in resources will not only engender violent conflicts but also will be instrumental in redefining who people are

in terms that do not coincide with the borders of existing states. Religion and tribal ethnicity, not national governments or international organizations, will define political realities. Islam, which from its beginnings has been characterized by militancy, can be expected to become increasingly attractive to the downtrodden of the world, in an era driven by environmental stress, increased cultural sensitivity, heightened ethnocentricity, and erosion of national boundaries. Indeed, Islam is already the world's fastest growing religion. Conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and between Turkic Muslims and Slavic Orthodox Christians in the Caucasus and the Caspian littoral will be increasingly likely in the next few decades. Professor Thomas Homer-Dixon of the University of Toronto has summarized the new world that is upon us, with all its disparities and dangers: "Think of a stretch limo in the pot-holed streets of New York City, where homeless beggars live. Inside the limo are the air-conditioned post-industrial regions of North America, Europe, the Pacific Rim, parts of Latin America, and a few other spots with their trade summitry and computer-information highways. Outside is the rest of mankind, going in a completely different direction."[3]

The ineluctable truth is that we are entering a bifurcated world, with comparatively few healthy, well-fed techno-elites, and a much larger number of people condemned to a life that, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[4] The techno-elites, with a struggle, to be sure, will master or at least contain their most critical environmental stresses of the next century, but the vast majority of mankind, crippled by poverty, a lack of technology, and their rich neighbor's indifference will be unable to do so.

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3.   As quoted in Nuruddin Farah, "Highway to Hell: The Travel-Writing of the Disaster," *Transition* 70 (1996): 62.

4.   Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Marshall Missner (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2008), 83.

Even in the U.S., where the gap between rich and poor is steadily widening, we are witnessing an increasing polarization between the techno-elites and the techno-illiterates. The fact that many of the latter are African-Americans and Hispanics only exacerbates problems in an already racially divided country.

Make no mistake about it, the brave new world of globalization is filled with uncertainties and replete with dangers, even here in the land of techno-elites. Technology so dazzling and relentless that it may well exceed the capacity of the human species to understand its implications and adapt to its consequences will have immense impact on our perceptions of humanity's uniqueness. None of us can fully comprehend the moral and ethical implications of such advances as mapping of the human genome; transplanting organs from bio-engineered animal species; chemical therapies custom-designed to correct deficiencies in the genomes of patients; artificially enhanced domestic animals; cloning of animal species, perhaps even humans; interspecies hybrids; genetically altered plant species; or computing devices which equal or exceed some attributes of the human mind. No wonder thoughtful observers ask, will the human species adapt or be overwhelmed?

If we are to make our way safely through the uncharted waters of the next century, we must, in my view, look increasingly beyond the lure of technology to the deeper roots of human community, rebuilding positive aspects of the social cohesiveness of earlier times, and learning to put aside the ancient tribal hatreds that have divided and destroyed civilizations from time immemorial. We must consider all of the inhabitants of this globe as fellow travelers on a spaceship, endowed with glorious yet finite resources, and we must learn to replace the selfishness of "the natural man" with a genuine concern for the good of all mankind. Continuance of the current disparity between rich and poor—for every sixty-five dollars earned in rich countries, one dollar is earned in poor ones, and the gap is widening—is simply a recipe for disaster on a scale never before seen in human history.

We begin to understand the interconnectedness of all peoples everywhere as we internalize the Apostle Paul's famous statement to the Athenians: "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). The implications of Paul's prescient observation are clear: all men and women everywhere literally are brothers and sisters, members of the same spiritual family, with all the obligations and responsibilities of sibling relationships that implies. If we value the future, then prejudice, bigotry, and racism—all of which have caused so much suffering and harm since time began—must be replaced with the brotherhood of which Jesus and every other great religious leader in history taught.

We reaffirm our familial relationships with others as we join in loving, serving, and suffering together. As we do so, we find that the superficial differences that have kept us apart fall away, and we see others not as stereotypes or caricatures, but as real people, not much different than we are ourselves.

I finish where I began: it seems apparent that the century we are now entering will be tumultuous and turbulent. That should hardly surprise us. We are, after all, living in the great winding-up scenes of human history. Amidst all the turmoil that will surround us in coming years, we have the divine assurance that "the righteous need not fear" (1 Nephi 22:17). Secure in our knowledge that we are engaged in God's work, anchored in our testimonies of the strength of this great latter-day work, firm in our faith in God and His prophets, we can face the future with equanimity and optimism, doing our duty as God has revealed it to us, and entrusting the future to Him whose servants we all are.