

# future news

a newsletter from the *futures* foundation

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## Alternative futures or benighted nations?

**M**ust we mourn the end of global civilisation even before we achieve it? Is global anarchy the most likely outcome of America's actions (and ours) in Iraq?

Thoughtful commentators the world over are deeply concerned about the aftermath of events of the past few months. As Sydney human rights lawyer, Simon Rice, puts it, recent actions by the US and its allies raise real questions about the continuing legitimacy of the United Nations as the protector of international security and order – and the protector of human rights.

"What relevance does the UN have now if a country which is powerful and determined enough can simply say, 'we will do it our way'? It undermines the UN's reason for being and is contrary to the letter and spirit of the UN Charter."

He reminds us that the United Nations was born of the horrors of World War II, and the awful conse-

**Benighted**, *adj.* 1. Intellectually or morally ignorant; unenlightened. 2. Overtaken by darkness or night

quences of nations asserting their power over others. In its Charter, member states agree to give the United Nations the sole power to authorise the use of force against each other.

"What happened a few months ago was that some powers got impatient. They didn't like the process. True, they may have a case that the process is dated and needs to be revisited. But rather than work within the system they had agreed to, they simply spat the dummy. They walked away from the agreement and acted unilaterally. Now the question for the UN, and for us and for the future of a civilised world, is whether and how the UN can reassert its authority."

On the basis of earlier work on the alternative futures of law, Rice postulated some alternative scenarios for global futures of the macro kind.

"If you were going to workshop this, the first thing you would do as a hypothesis is subtract the UN from the current world order. You would say, 'what would happen if there was no overall controlling mechanism to which countries agreed to pay respect?' If you

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### PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AT RISK

"The United Nations' development of human rights guarantees has been in the context of its mandate to create and maintain an ordered and secure world," says Simon Rice. "It has clearly been challenged in doing that, and has had to deal with all manner of international crises, but it has managed to do it until now.

"It is ironic that the particular power that has now undermined the UN so critically is the USA, a power that throughout the history of the UN has declined to commit to the range of human rights standards that the UN promulgates.

"The USA, alone among developed countries, has declined to ratify international standards for economic and social rights, rights of the child, rights of women and so on. It is unfortunate that the world power that thinks it can police the world happens to be the world power that has committed least to adopting international human rights standards.

"The United Nations' core purpose is to maintain international order and security, within which human rights can develop and evolve. Take away a global context of stable countries, with the rule of law, transparency and accountability, and human rights will be unprotected."

### PLUS

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## United or benighted? (from p 1)

wanted to give that scenario a name you would have to call it *Law of the Jungle*.

"Of course you would create different scenarios. There is a clear argument that *Steady as She Goes* doesn't work - it is dated, power balances have shifted, the importance of industrialised democracies as against developing non-democracies has changed. So you would develop something new. Whatever form that might take, I don't think you would end up with a scenario that didn't involve an enormous degree of international cooperation in the form of some kind of a united nations organisation."

Rice points out that the UN's authority depends entirely on the respect it gets from its members.

"This might seem like castles in the air, but it is also true of governance at a national level. The rule of law in our own society depends on our respecting it. If we don't, anarchy follows and if the participants of the UN don't respect it, international anarchy follows.

"So if we accept that ultimately the success of the UN is going to turn on the belief of the participants, then I think we must ask the participants to rework it."

Former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Michael Moore, agrees. Indeed, he has challenged Australia and New Zealand, with Timor and Indonesia, to launch an initiative aimed at the reform of the UN and its agencies (*AFR 10 04 03*).

The former director-general of the World Trade Organisation argues that such a group would have the moral authority to begin a process of confidence building.

And he says it should begin with a clean sheet of paper with the basic question, "what would be the international architecture if we could start again?"

Simon Rice would be delighted to see such an initiative gain momentum but finds it hard to be optimistic.

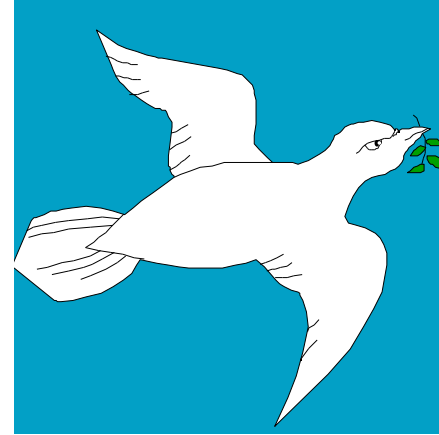
"Looking at possible and probable alternative futures for the UN is not promising," he said. He considers that

- a global future without the UN is unthinkable
- the current UN is unsustainable, and
- that while a new approach to international cooperation could be very exciting, the chance of achieving it is unfortunately slim.

"I have real doubts about the ability of the organisation to transform itself.

"Part of thinking about any scenario is considering the constraints, and its feasibility.

"The task of transforming the United Nations is entirely dependent on the goodwill of its participants.



"Like the organisation itself, a process of change would be severely compromised by interactions among its participants -- the interactions of politics and power.

"It took a terrible world war to get member nations to agree to start the United Nations. I am not sure what it would take to get them to agree to change it."

## Environmental protection is a human rights issue

**E**nvironmental rights are moving up the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCHR). At its meeting in Geneva this year, the Commission considered an issue paper from the International Program of Earthjustice that highlights the human rights implications of environmental protection. And on World Health Day, UN special rapporteur Paul Hunt argued that the human right to health is not simply the right to health care.

"It is also a right to the underlying determinants of health, including food and nutrition, housing, access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, and a healthy environment," said Hunt.

"Every year, more than five million children aged 0-14 die from diseases linked to the environment, such as malaria, schistosomiasis and cholera. Exposure to pollution and toxic substances threatens the health of children throughout the world. Poverty, conflict and natural disasters create particular difficulties for sustaining healthy environments for children."

Environmental rights are already on the way to becoming a prevailing legal norm. Of the 191 nations in the world, there are now 109 national constitutions that mention the protection of the environment or natural resources. One hundred of them recognize the right to a clean and healthy environment and/or the state's obligation to prevent environmental harm, Earthjustice reports.

Fifty-three constitutions explicitly recognize the right to a clean and healthy environment, and 92 make it the duty of the national government to prevent harm to the environment.

"The relationship between environmental problems and human rights violations calls for a holistic treatment of these issues," Earthjustice said.

"International, governmental and nongovernmental institutions dedicated to protecting human rights must recognise the connection and take steps to provide mechanisms to address the human rights implications of environmental problems."

# WHO GIVES A CONTINENTAL?

Continental, *n.* the least bit; a damn; I don't give a continental. [from continental, a piece of paper money issued by the Continental Congress during the War of American Independence]

Nineteenth century European audiences were vastly amused by returned explorers who told of primitive natives failing to recognise the value of gold, jewels or even paper money. It seems unlikely that late 21st century audiences will be amused by recalling contemporary Australia's attitude to its own natural wealth. Yet the parallel is clear: this nation is squandering the continent's huge biological wealth because it fails to understand its value. *(Of course, this is a charitable view. But surely it wouldn't be greed or self-interest? Would it?)*

The Federal Government's National Land and Water Resources Audit, leaked to the Sydney Morning Herald in April, lists almost 1600 threatened species and widespread environmental degradation. Converting the tragedy into terms that today's primitive natives might understand, the report said it could cost at least \$4.5 billion just to restore vegetation to the worst-affected parts of the continent.

Australia has long had the worst record for mammal extinctions on Earth. "One third of the world's extinct mammals since 1600AD are Australian," says the report. "Such a record is unparalleled in any other component of Australia's biodiversity, or anywhere else in the world."

In all, 346 vertebrates, eight invertebrates and 1241 plants are listed as threatened. And the crisis

appears to be worsening, a direct result of environmental degradation, especially land clearing in Queensland and NSW.

"Who cares?", asks the Herald's James Woodford. He attempts another translation for the primitive natives: "The report highlights the fact that nature-based tourism is estimated to make up 4.7 per cent of gross domestic product in direct terms and 11 per cent indirectly.

"Imagine how much a Tasmanian tiger would be worth for tourism today."

Woodford also points out that the Australian landscape and its wildlife are entangled to a degree that we are only just beginning to understand. "Many animals provide fundamental environmental services such as pollination of plants, turning over soil and controlling insect pests."

The ecosystem on which most of Sydney sits, the Cumberland Plain, is considered one of the most endangered ecosystems on the continent. The Murrumbateman district on the ACT/NSW border has had 99.5 per cent of its precious ecosystem destroyed for agriculture. Almost 60 of the sub-regions covered by the report have less than 30 per cent of native vegetation cover. Threatened plants were in decline in 177 sub-regions, birds in 240, mammals in 194, reptiles in 119 and amphibians in 65.

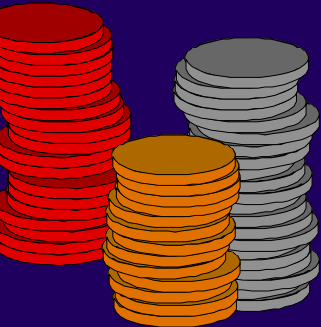
## You pollute, you pay

Another translation of environmental issues into contemporary (\$) language comes from Charter, journal of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia, which warns companies of potential environmental costs under the growing provisions of environmental law. PriceWaterhouseCoopers partner Liz Wilde writes that environmental compliance is becoming more than doing the minimum to remain within the strict limits of the law.

"A company's failure to properly manage its environmental impacts can give rise not only to prosecution and the imposition of monetary penalties, but it can also result in a significant financial impost for the company in a number of other ways," she says. (And that's without touching on the areas of reputation, brand management or stakeholder relations.)

"While the potential liability for direct pollution can be severe, it is now fairly well accepted and comes as no real surprise to the modern director or manager. But these obligations are merely the tip of the iceberg. It is the more indirect environmental costs that are not generally well understood by the business community."

***"this nation is squandering the continent's huge biological wealth because it fails to understand its value."***



## GONE BUSH

Why is the Bush administration systematically dismantling US laws designed to protect the health of the environment and of Americans? How can this unravelling of rights occur while the administration claims to promote freedom and democracy abroad? According to John Passacantando, executive director of Greenpeace USA, the disconnect between George W. Bush's rhetoric about the Middle East and his lack of efforts to protect citizens at home has created his greatest credibility gap.

"Take air pollution. Just as some of the nation's oldest and dirtiest power plants were about to be forced to reduce the amount of pollutants they emit, the Bush administration let them off the hook with a deceiving piece of legalese called the Clear Skies Initiative.

"What about our pristine national forests? In the name of 'healthy forests' and 'fire prevention', the Forest Service has proposed nearly unlimited clear-cutting of forests. Long-standing mandates for public input and environmental review would be eliminated.

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# REGIME CHANGE FOR THE US IN 2004?

Will activist America seek a regime change of its own in 2004? It is tempting to speculate what could happen if an electorate not noted for voter participation were to be mobilised by its collective outrage over, for example:

- America's invasion of Iraq, including its betrayal of the United Nations
- growing corporate power and spectacular corporate scandals;
- blatant conflicts and improper links between government leaders and government contracts;
- the irregularities of the last presidential election; and
- growing evidence of the dire condition of the US economy.

Futurist Hazel Henderson is one of those who suggest that only a regime change can rescue the United States from itself -- and, on the way, repair the damage it has done to the ideals of democracy itself.

"I join the many millions in the USA and around the world protesting and asking how the USA—once a beacon to those seeking a better world, democracy, the rule of law, economic opportunity and individual self-realisation—could have turned into a

## GONE BUSH (from page 3)

"Isn't clean water a necessity? Yet the Environmental Protection Agency has announced plans to reduce the number of wetlands and waterways protected by the Clean Water Act."

Passacantando also notes that although there is plenty of talk about homeland security, the Bush administration has blocked efforts that would require thousands of chemical and nuclear plants to become more secure.

"Furthermore, while President Bush openly worries about instability in the Middle East, all measures to make the U.S. less dependent on oil -- for example, through increased auto fuel efficiency or the Kyoto Protocol -- have been stopped dead in their tracks.

"So why aren't we all well aware of this war being waged against the environment? Federal agencies with authority over environmental programs are working in a coordinated effort to help oil, coal, logging, mining, chemical and auto companies promote their short-term profits at the expense of our health and our public lands.

"The bitter irony of this administration is that the patriotic language it has used to wage war on another nation seems desperately out of place here at home.

"Our water, food, forests, air and oceans are at risk.

"In turn, so are the futures of our families, our livelihoods and our personal health. In its efforts to promote a brighter horizon for those suffering abroad, the Bush administration should take a look first in its own backyard."

*[The previous administration also has a disappointing environmental record. Ed.]*

self-appointed, over-militarised globocop claiming the pre-emptive right to bomb and attack other nations it deems 'evil'."

Dr Henderson lists some of the reasons her adopted country has strayed from its former role as champion of multilateralism and the rule of international law.

- The US democracy has been gradually undermined by the rise of corporate power. Today, the Congress is dominated by powerful lobbies....After the disastrous stalemated election of 2000, Bush, who had lost the popular vote, was 'selected' by the Republican-dominated Supreme Court.
- The corporate takeover in the USA and its culture of winner-take-all... has been the subject of endless press coverage, public hearings, lawsuits and public outrage. Yet few reforms, watered down by intense lobbying by interested industries, have been achieved. The administration's deep corporate connections, initially a boast of George W. Bush, are now a source of embarrassment and covered up with media spin.
- The conglomeration of mass media in giant corporations...has narrowed choice and further trivialised news and content. The Pentagon controlled coverage of the war on Iraq via training and 'embedding'...

The Center for Public Integrity ([www.publicintegrity.org](http://www.publicintegrity.org)) broke the story of widespread conflicts of interest and war profiteering within the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board (DPB). This led Richard Perle, longtime Bush adviser and 'hawk' to resign as its chair. DPB's 30 members who advise Donald Rumsfeld include nine with ties to companies that have won over \$76 billion in defense contracts in 2001 and 2002.

"No wonder the US public is confused, divided and misinformed," writes Dr Henderson. "The people were also kept in the dark about the cost of the war on Iraq until after it started... Now most states are facing budget crises and are cutting education, health and human services, with no help from the now deficit-ridden federal government.

"All these tragic circumstances reveal the flaws in US-style democracy, which relies so heavily on a free press to act as the Fourth Estate, to balance and check the power of the President, the Congress and the Courts. If a free mass media does not, as Thomas Jefferson warned, 'inform the consent of the governed', democracy fails. The new Patriot Act, along with the new Homeland Security bureaucracy, continue to erode press freedom and individual civil liberties with more surveillance, secrecy, arbitrary arrests and detentions.

"Furthermore, the US economy remains in dire straits with a still-falling dollar, a trade deficit of 5.2% of GDP; heavily-indebted corporate and consumer sectors, vulnerable to \$30 a barrel oil and OPEC's big retaliatory card: redenominating its oil in euros." Dr Henderson offered a recipe for the recovery of traditional US strengths, but conceded that it may not be easy.

"All this may take a regime change in the USA in the elections of 2004."

# Back to the future for food

**W**ill future societies return to more labour intensive methods of agriculture? British author Colin Tudge suggests that this could be the very rational solution to the problems posed by today's economic rationalism.

His new book about the future of food, *So Shall We Reap*, argues that if we are to avoid the continuing wreckage of rural communities and the environment, as well as major crises such as BSE, what is needed is good husbandry. And good husbandry -- husbandry that is safe and sustainable -- requires a large and intelligent workforce.

In a thoughtful approach that explores the complexities of different kinds of capitalism, Tudge reveals the underlying destruction wrought by the 20th century model (now also, it seems, the 21st century model) of neo-monetarism. This leads him to ask even deeper questions, such as how to install a robust model of capitalism that really does serve human needs; how to release science (which has been captured by capital) from its feedback loop; and what "morality" should really mean and how to reinstate it as the prime driver of human affairs.

"The present economy is capitalism in an extreme form: a form that earlier, broader thinkers (Jefferson, Madison, Keynes) specifically warned against. It may be summarised as monetarist-industrialist-corporatist-globalist: MICG. Capitalism in itself is not the evil. That is a false target. MICG very definitely is; and the people who spelled out the evil most cogently were capitalists themselves....

"The MICG model, applied to agriculture, is a disaster at all levels. Agriculture is the most important material endeavour of humankind. If we get it right, then we have a fair chance that we can get everything else right as well: a sound and diverse environment; just and balanced societies worldwide (autonomous, dignified, with full and satisfying employment); and a sustainable supply of good food -- not just nourishing, but the kind that people

like to eat. But if we get agriculture wrong, then, as in Greek tragedy, in which initial folly sets off a domino wave of disaster, everything else will be compromised to the point of catastrophe."

The role of science in agriculture, as elsewhere, has become subject to its context, which is increasingly dependence on funding by the people who have capital and want to use it to create more.

"In a nutshell, what is needed is good husbandry -- excellent craft abetted by excellent science; and such a combination might be called 'enlightened agriculture'. But at present science is deployed to override good husbandry, to cut costs. The cutting of costs is held to be all-important; not to provide cheap food, as governments pretend (and perhaps believe) but to maximise the difference between cost and sale price, this difference being the 'profit'."



Tudge argues that the growth of companies into giant corporations is the most significant political phenomenon of the 20th century and that, unlike fascism or communism, it is the enduring legacy.

"The founders of the modern US, notably Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, knew that companies could grow too big, and override the societies that gave rise to them. So they made laws to forbid the growth of companies beyond the margins of the state -- 'state' meaning Virginia or Maryland, not the US as a whole. Those laws have long since gone by the board.

"Science-assisted technology makes the growth possible. Indeed, we now have a positive feedback loop. Capital finances science (not least because governments are more and more reluctant to do so), which in turn provides the kind of high technologies that will produce more capital; and so on and so on. Science has become the handmaiden of commerce."

## THERAPY FOR AN AILING PLANET

The climate-propelled spread of diseases of humans, animals, and ecosystems constitutes yet another emerging crisis in this period of proliferating crises, writes Ross Gelbspan in the *Boston Globe* (22 04 03).

"Many of the new and recurring epidemics are fuelled by a warming atmosphere, which is accelerating the disappearance of species, spawning weather extremes, and driving shifts in biological systems. Intensifying climate change portends increased mortality from heat, especially in urban areas, more disease from increasing insect populations, destruction of food crops from extreme weather events and pests, and the increasing scarcity of drinking water.

"Developing countries are especially vulnerable because they lack resources for coping and for providing adequate health services."

He argues that a rapid worldwide program to rewire the planet with clean energy could provide a common solution for some of the planet's most alarming challenges: "our newfound vulnerability to international terrorism, distortions in our foreign policy from our dependency on oil, and persisting concerns about global economic stagnation.

"Allowing the climate to restabilise would not solve all these health problems. But if such a global public works program to change the world's energy systems were structured to promote poverty alleviation in the developing world, it would go a long way toward making the world a healthier place."

Ross Gelbspan is author of "The Heat Is On." <http://www.heatisonline.org>



# Signals in the noise

## Silence is fatal

With fewer than 100 fatalities so far, and a relatively modest death rate, it may be tempting to write off SARS responses as alarmist overreactions. But this is to miss the point about what makes SARS genuinely scary - its contagiousness. The shroud of secrecy in the early stages means we have missed the best chance we will have to stamp out the infection without a vaccine.

*New Scientist* 12 04 03 1119

## The super 'time bomb'

Since the stock market slump, some of Australia's biggest and most profitable companies are sitting on a superannuation time-bomb that could cost them hundreds of millions of dollars. Their defined benefit schemes are now in sharp deficit, and shareholders will bear the brunt of this fallout as more companies eat into profits to top up the shortfall.

*BRW* 17-23 04 03 1120

## A nation lost

Even before conclusions can be drawn about the war in Iraq (Saddam? Weapons of mass destruction? Iraqi stability? Cost to civilians? Syria?) a home front consensus is jelling around a radical revision of America's meaning in the world. Centered on coercive unilateralism, the new doctrine assumes that the United States not only stands apart from other countries but above them. The primitive tribalism of boys at football games -- "We're number one!" -- has been transformed into an axiom of strategy. Military force has replaced democratic idealism as the main source of US influence.

*Boston Globe* 22 04 03 1121

## How safe is nanotech?

As the nanotech revolution gathers pace, few are giving a thought to the impact on health and environment. We may live to regret this oversight. Interactions with other materials, including human tissue, are not yet well understood. Research suggests nanotubes can damage healthy lung tissue.

*New Scientist* 29 03 03 1122

## Where are the keys to the clean car?

Ford's small, green Th!nk City model has been discontinued in the US only months after it was unveiled in a flurry of glitz. The all-electric car needs no petrol and produces no pollution. Meanwhile, automobile companies have teamed up to take out a lawsuit against California's "zero emission vehicle" policy. There are about 45,000 'clean cars' in the US and 20,000 in Europe.

*Australian Financial Review* 17-21 04 03 1123

## Sugar industry threatens to scupper WHO

The sugar industry in the US is threatening to bring the World Health Organization to its knees by demanding that Congress end its funding unless the WHO scraps guidelines on healthy eating. The threat is being described by WHO insiders as tantamount to blackmail and worse than any pressure exerted by the tobacco lobby. In a letter to Harlem Brundtland, the WHO's director general, the Sugar Association says it will "exercise every avenue available to expose the dubious nature" of the WHO's report on diet and nutrition, including challenging its \$406m (£260m) funding from the US.

*The Guardian (UK)* 21 04 03 1124

## Corporate homicide

Street murders occur every day in America. And they are prosecuted every day. Corporate homicides occur every day in America. But they are rarely prosecuted. The last homicide prosecution brought against a major American corporation was in 1980, when Ford Motor Co. was charged with homicide for the deaths of three teenaged girls....Now comes Ira Robbins, a professor of criminal law at American University, who argues that the time is ripe to bring a homicide prosecution against the tobacco companies and their executives

*www.commondreams* 01 04 03 1125

## Halliburton, Dick Cheney, and wartime spoils

US Vice President Dick Cheney is former CEO of Halliburton, an oil-services company that provides construction and military support services. The US Army has awarded a no-bid contract to extinguish oil well fires in Iraq to a subsidiary of Halliburton, granted under a January Bush administration waiver that allowed government agencies to handpick companies for Iraqi reconstruction projects. It was open-ended, with no time limits and no dollar limits.

*www.commondreams.org* 11 03 03 1126