

Hiding in the open

Why we missed the threat of a new pandemic – and other existential risks

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For many years, John Gittings was a distinguished journalist on The Guardian newspaper. He is now a foremost peace historian. His landmark book, The Glorious Art of Peace, should be in every peace activist's library (Oxford, £12.99).

In his dystopian novel *The Shape of Things to Come*, published in 1933, H G Wells imagined a future when the world's population is cut in half by a deadly pandemic virus. Today, this novel seems much more believable to us than his *War of the Worlds*. We don't expect Martians to land on a common near Woking, but we can readily identify with a story line in which an unknown fever spreads from baboons in Africa, via an intermediate host, to humanity across the world. Yet *The Shape of Things to Come* was soon forgotten, and so was the very real pandemic that was fresh in Wells's mind – the 'Spanish flu' that had taken at least 50 million lives after the First World War.

Why have we failed to take precautions against a global pandemic until it was upon us? And why have we so often ignored or played down the warning signs of other dangers that threaten us? Here I shall look at three of these threats – the pandemic itself, the climate crisis, and the lurking danger of a nuclear weapons accident. (This is only a selection from the list of 'existential risks' identified in current research, such as an actual nuclear war, whether launched deliberately or by miscalculation, engineered biological agents, and the unforeseen consequences of robotic technology and artificial intelligence).¹

The reasons for these failures are numerous: Cold War rivalries old and new, powerful economic and military vested interests, a determinist belief shared by capitalism and socialism alike in the boundless potential of science, neo-liberal doctrines that promote global inequality,

and our innate tendency both as individuals and societies to deny unpleasant truths and take refuge in false optimism. We need to understand them all, examine the few occasions when there has been some effective threat response, and find better ways of acting ahead of time before the next disaster strikes.²

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*Hear you not the rushing sound of the coming tempest?
Do you not behold the clouds open, and destruction lurid
and dire pour down on the blasted earth?*

Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, 1826

(The first dystopian novel with its plot based on a world pandemic)

The significance of ‘Spanish flu’ was well understood in the years immediately after by health authorities such as the American Medical Association, which in 1927 warned of ‘the almost certain recurrence some day of another world-wide pandemic’.³ However, half a century later when the First World War was commemorated, the pandemic which had followed the war – and probably was caused by it — was barely mentioned. There were flurries of concern with ‘Asian flu’ in 1957, ‘Hong Kong flu’ in 1968-69, and swine flu in 1976, but it was only the spread of HIV-AIDS in the late 1980s and 1990s that finally re-focused attention on the pandemic threat.

In 1996 President Bill Clinton set up a task force to tackle the issue for reasons that resonate today. Emerging infectious diseases presented ‘one of the most significant health and security challenges facing the global community’. Contributing factors such as climate change and the increased movement of people worsened the threat. And most US cities were within a day and half by air from anywhere in the world – ‘less time than the incubation period of many infectious diseases’.⁴

Two years later when the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sponsored an international conference, one of the papers was from a now familiar name — Anthony S Fauci. We are vulnerable to new and re-emerging diseases, he wrote, though fortunately there was ‘a growing awareness that we live in a global community, that diseases do not recognize borders...’⁵

Fauci was far too optimistic. The SARS Covid 1 crisis of 2003 engaged the attention of world leaders for a while. The World Health Organization warned in its annual report for that year of the potential for a future

pandemic to spread ‘in a closely interconnected and highly mobile world’. The key lessons learnt this time would be invaluable in ‘being ready for the day when the next new disease arrives without warning’.⁶ Yet it is a brutal reality that SARS did not last long enough, nor kill a sufficient number of people, to encourage governments to be ‘ready for the day’. Neither did the re-emergence of Ebola in 2014 once the ‘dangerous threat’ – as David Cameron described it – of it spreading outside West Africa had passed. Cameron could have consulted the 2013 UK National Risk Register (NRR) which warned that ‘the rapid spread from person to person... can have significant global human health consequences’. It predicted that up to half the population of the UK could be infected and that hundreds of thousands of deaths might occur.⁷ And the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) for 2015 (with a foreword by Cameron) put pandemic influenza and infectious disease as a ‘Tier 1’ threat.⁸

In September 2019, as the virus was probably already beginning to spread in China, the Global Pandemic Monitoring Board, set up jointly by the WHO and the World Bank, published its first report with the title ‘A World at Risk’. There was a ‘very real threat’ of a pathogen that might kill 50 to 80 million people and wipe out nearly 5% of the world’s economy, and yet ‘the world is not prepared’.⁹ This report was barely noticed in the UK — where certain other subjects were more important. The world was not prepared and neither were we.

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This is the hinge of history at which we stand, the door to the future opening to a crisis more sudden, more global, more inescapable and more bewildering than ever encountered by the human species ...

Barbara Ward and René Dubois, *Only One Earth*, 1972

Awareness of humanity’s disastrous effect upon the natural balance dates a long way back. Two UNESCO conferences were held in 1949 to consider ‘the wasteful use of the world’s natural resources’ and the ‘protection of nature’. The greatest danger, said the US conservationist Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., was that ‘technological progress ha[s] blinded human eyes to our essential dependence upon nature’.¹⁰ And a British delegate, the ecologist Frank Fraser Darling, warned that the world must ‘live in harmony with the human principles of ecology. Otherwise the species will die out’.¹¹

The Cold War intervened and there was very little follow up to these

early explorations, but attention revived in the 1960s and '70s, as the hidden costs of intensive economic development began to be measured. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), exposing the effects of agricultural pesticides, would sell two million copies worldwide. Concerns about the consequences of unrestrained growth were aired in the Club of Rome's report on *The Limits to Growth* (1970), and more effectively in E F Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973).

In 1972 the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment warned that the discharge of toxic and other substances could inflict 'serious or irreversible damage' upon world ecosystems.¹² This conference too was blighted by the Cold War, being boycotted by the Soviet bloc after East Germany was excluded under Western pressure. But by the end of the 1970s the scientific basis for human-promoted climate change was well established. In an article in February 1978 summarising the state of knowledge so far, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (BAS)* asked 'is mankind warming the Earth?' and answered with an 'unqualified yes!'¹³ As Nathaniel Rich has written in his study of lost opportunities, 'nearly everything we understand about global warming was understood in 1979'. The following decade was the one when 'we could have stopped climate change' but failed to.¹⁴

Real progress could only begin after the Cold War ended, with the first commitments made, at the May 1990 Bergen Conference on Sustainable Development, to reduce greenhouse gases. Global warming now entered into the vocabulary of environmental concern. Yet in spite of growing awareness and action since then, this has always lagged behind what was needed, and the phrase 'too little too late' crops up frequently in objective assessments. Not until the 2015 Paris agreement were internationally agreed targets set to limit greenhouse gas emissions. These, said the environmental economist Nicholas Stern, 'were simply inadequate when compared with the scale and urgency of the risks that the world faces...'¹⁵

In 2007 the annual 'Doomsday Clock' statement of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* ranked climate change for the first time as an equal threat to that of nuclear weapons. In its 2017 statement the *BAS* said that world leaders not only failed to deal adequately with nuclear and climate threats but were increasing them 'through a variety of provocative statements and actions...' It was not hard to guess who was being referred to.

'NUCLEAR MISHAP.

B52 transporting two nuclear bombs crashed Jan. 1961. Widespread disaster averted: three crewmen died 3 mi. S.'

Drivers entering the small town of Eureka in the Greensboro area of North Carolina are greeted today by this arresting road-sign. It recalls the time when a Boeing B-52 Strato-fortress carrying two four-megaton nuclear bombs broke up in mid-air. Each bomb was more than 250 times as powerful as the one dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, and the fallout if one had exploded could have reached Washington DC, three days after President John F Kennedy delivered his inaugural address there. When one of the bombs hit the ground, the impact sent a signal to fire, but fortunately the cockpit safety switch had remained at 'safe' rather than shifting position. Every other safety mechanism failed.¹⁶

Within a decade reports of nuclear bomb related accidents had multiplied until the US Department of Defense felt obliged to respond, issuing in 1981 a list of those that it admitted to date, with sanitised details.¹⁷ The most dramatic of these was the accident in September 1980 at a Titan base near Damascus, Arkansas, in which the skin of a Titan missile was punctured when a technician dropped the socket of his wrench. One of the fuels in the missile ignited and the warhead was ejected. If it had exploded it would have incinerated most of Arkansas.¹⁸

Less well reported were those nuclear accidents arising not from mechanical problems but from the misinterpretation of data. In 1983 at the height of Cold War tension, a Soviet early-warning system appeared to show that the US had launched five Minuteman missiles. The officer responsible for analysing the data in real time, Lt Col Stanislav Petrov, decided that it was a false alarm. If he had decided differently, the Soviet leadership under President Andropov (who was obsessed with the risk of a secret US nuclear attack) might have ordered instant retaliation.¹⁹

US General George Lee Butler, head of Strategic Air Command in the early 1990s, would later recall that '... we escaped the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust by some combination of skill, luck, and divine intervention, probably the latter in greatest proportion'.²⁰

So is the danger of a nuclear weapons accident leading to conflict by mischance or miscalculation merely a matter of history now? There are fewer weapons than in the 1980s but there are more nuclear powers, and because of advances in delivery speed and technical sophistication, the consequences of a systems failure may be harder to contain. The authoritative work on this subject is Eric Schlosser's *Command and*

Control, and his conclusion is unequivocal: ‘Right now thousands of missiles are hidden away, literally out of sight, topped with warheads and ready to go, awaiting the right electrical signal. They are a collective death wish, barely suppressed’.²¹ *The Economist* published a review of this book under the accurate headline ‘Start Worrying’.²²

Yet the various nuclear threats (and they include nuclear war by design as well as by accident) gain little public attention except from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, and other campaigning groups, and from politicians and generals who finally speak out in retirement. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has also become more vocal than his predecessors, warning on Hiroshima Day 2020 that the risk of nuclear weapons being used, ‘intentionally, by accident or through miscalculation, is too high for such trends to continue’.²³

Yes, we should Start Worrying.

* * *

The causes of inaction

There are many reasons why the warning signs of crisis have been missed over the years and we need to understand them all. Most obvious are the blocking activities of vested interests particularly in the area of climate change. The power of the fossil fuel conglomerates may have begun to wane as global warming hits home with floods, droughts, forest fires, and other till now exceptional weather events now affecting the North as well as the South, but their lobbying delayed or weakened effective action for almost three decades — and they have not given up. In the US presidential election some US\$87 million was donated to the Trump camp by the fossil fuel industry – though late in the day some companies hedged their bet by donating to the Biden campaign on a much smaller scale.²⁴

On the nuclear weapons front, the role of the arms industry has been well understood since President Dwight Eisenhower in his farewell address in 1961 warned against the danger of the ‘unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex...’²⁵ Industry-funded think-tanks promoted President Reagan’s Star Wars initiative in the 1980s. Today they lobby successfully for massive increases in the military budget to develop potentially destabilising new advanced weapons systems. These efforts are matched by those of the Russian military-industrial complex, with giant companies such as Rostec

led by members of the post-Soviet *nomenklatura* under President Vladimir Putin.²⁶ The Dutch peace organisation PAX calculated in 2018 that governments around the world were contracted to the expenditure of at least US\$116 billion on maintaining and developing nuclear weapons – an incomplete statistic because of state secrecy.²⁷

Developing vaccines is an expensive business and could cost up to US\$1 billion, with no guarantee of success. After initial enthusiasm, efforts to produce a vaccine for SARS1 in 2003 petered out as the threat declined, and a potential source of useful data for SARS2 was lost. The profit motive was also a factor, according to the then WHO director Margaret Chan in 2014, behind the delay in producing effective vaccines for Ebola.²⁸ It is relevant that ‘while the world-wide pharmaceutical market is worth more than \$1 trillion, the market for vaccines makes up at most 3% of it’.²⁹ The rapid development now of vaccines for Covid-19 shows that the industry will only function with state aid or a certainty of financial return.

Yet to point the finger solely at economic and financial vested interests as the cause of damaging delay ignores the broader world-view of political leaders and influencers that allows those interests to dictate policy. As the Harvard economist Dani Rodrik has argued, ideas are crucial in shaping interests and the world views of global policymakers underpin their actions ‘in both economic and political domains’.³⁰

A clear example is in UK nuclear weapons policy where calculations of risk and cost are outweighed by the dogma of nuclear deterrence. The Ministry of Defence insists that nuclear weapons are needed to deter extreme threats that the nation might face ‘not just now, but those that might emerge in the decades to come’.³¹ This approach, first set out by Tony Blair when pressing for renewal of Britain’s Trident ‘deterrent’ force, means that it will never be safe to exist without such weapons. Nuclear disarmament is postponed until the Greek Calends.³²

Our collective failure to anticipate future catastrophe also arises from a preference as individuals to seek short-term gains and to discount future losses, and from a deep instinct to shut our eyes to unwelcome realities until we have no alternative. Behavioural scientists have studied the effects of ‘temporal discounting’: the preference for immediate over long-term benefits even though the latter may be more worthwhile. In democracies this is encouraged by the brief time-span of elected governments, but authoritarian regimes also have to take into account popular feeling.³³

Those instincts that help us to cope with the uncertainties of life and so have been favoured by natural selection also render us less able to guard

against real but more remote dangers. Studies have shown that the vast majority of the population displays an ‘optimism bias’, clinging to the hope that things will be better than they are likely to be. The neuroscientist Tali Sharot explains that even though the hope of a better future may be an illusion, it ‘keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health’.³⁴ Also favoured by natural selection is the instinct to suppress any thought of extinction whether personal or collective that might inhibit our ability to function effectively in the present time. This is the instinct famously labelled by the American anthropologist Ernest Becker as the ‘denial of death’.³⁵

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How to act in the future

First, we need to better understand the many reasons for inaction or for tardy action when faced with existential risk as outlined in the section above. In doing so, we also need to study the record of such agreements as have been achieved, to acknowledge the role of public pressure and scientific argument. This has sometimes been successful but usually only for a limited extent and time. Sufficient action will only occur when the threat is either actual or visibly imminent, and where it directly affects the constituency where a remedy is sought rather than occurring at a distance.

HIV-AIDS was not tackled sufficiently until the deaths of thousands of mainly young males particularly in California and New York led to intensive medical research. Ebola was first identified in 1976, but research on a vaccine failed to interest any major pharmaceutical company until the WHO declared an emergency in 2014, amid fears that it might spread outside West Africa.³⁶

On climate change, it is a lasting irony that the most effective international agreement reached so far has been the 1987 Montreal Protocol which phased out CFCs and other ozone-depleting substances, after fears of an ‘ozone hole’ in the atmosphere (technically an inaccurate description), which captured public imagination. The Climate Change Convention, reached at the 1992 Rio Summit, was achieved in the atmosphere of relative optimism after the cold war, but only resulted in statements of principle. It was another five years before the Kyoto Protocol, binding developed countries to reduce emissions, was agreed and another ten years before this came into force. Nearly ten years after that, the agreement had only achieved mixed results.³⁷

World leaders from Eisenhower to Gorbachev have acknowledged the effect of public opinion upon nuclear weapons policy. However what got the Partial Test-ban Treaty over the line in 1963 was above all the fear shared equally by the US and the Soviet Union of China's nuclear weapons program. A more general fear of nuclear proliferation drove the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1971 — while it preserved the monopoly of the existing nuclear powers. A mixture of public pressure, economic argument and the thaw and ending of the cold war helped to achieve SALT and other agreements limiting the number of nuclear weapons. Yet the nuclear powers have continued to resist any move towards real nuclear disarmament and are united in opposing the UN 2020 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Cynically one might suggest that it will need a nuclear weapons accident or actual war to overcome their resistance — something which is not beyond the bounds of possibility. The disastrous nature of such a solution should impel us all the more urgently to find an alternative path.

The second requirement if we are to effectively anticipate existential risk is to transform the way that we prioritise policies and plans. The top priority should be the interests of future generations: the current generation may survive, but the odds shorten for those who come after. The development economist Frances Stewart has explored this in a recent paper,³⁸ arguing that the principle that all people are of equal moral worth should apply as much to future as to current generations. Yet our political institutions 'are almost invariably based on the votes and interests alive today'. Such institutions need to be 'future-proofed': A special UN agency should be created whose task is to represent future generations in all discussions, while in the UK this responsibility should be assigned to a government minister and to a parliamentary commission. These would draw on the work of a growing number of research groups such as the Oxford Future of Humanity Institute and the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk. A first step has already been made in Wales, under the Well-Being of Future Generations Act of 2015, and a few other countries including New Zealand and Malta have also taken action. To be effective more widely this will require a revolution in global governance. This may seem hard to achieve but as Greta Thunberg told the UN Climate Action Summit, 'the eyes of all future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you'.³⁹

Yet none of these goals will be achieved without a more sustained and more successful challenge to the dominant world-view of state elites across the world, under more than one doctrinal flag, which has opened up

the dire prospect of a new cold war. In the terms that they would understand, they are engaged in a zero-sum struggle and, even worse, a lose-lose contest, that has already led to multiple disasters and could lead to a terminal one. In the terms that we use, the elevation of competition for profit, exploitation of natural resources for short-term gain, and disregard of world poverty and inequality (while professing the contrary) amount to a violation of the basic principles of humanity. These principles which have enabled the human race to survive and develop through peace and cooperation, although constantly beset by hostile forces, need to be re-affirmed more than ever.

Notes

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19. Petrov gave an account of his decision in a BBC Russian service interview in 2013, accessed at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24280831.
20. Interview published by Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, *Waging Peace*, 27 May 2015.
21. Schlosser, cited above, p. 485.
22. *The Economist*, 28 Sept. 2013.
23. Video message from UN Secretary General António Guterres for UN75 in Hiroshima held on 6 Aug. 2020.
24. Reuters, ‘US Oil Majors Pitch more Cash to Democrats as Frack Battle Looms’, 24 Oct. 2020.
25. President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address, 17 Jan. 1961, at www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov.
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