



By: Jacques Attali

In order to survive, civilization must learn from historical precedents



Every generation believes that it is living in an unprecedented era with unique challenges. But time and again, the same patterns and motivations have weakened and even destroyed civilizations, or strengthened them and enabled them to flourish.

To learn from the past requires recognizing its symmetries and resonances.

For example, the rise and decline of powers over the centuries has established some basic tenets.

Chief among them is that when a dominant power faces two rivals, the rival that does not enter into conflict with the dominant power is usually the one that triumphs.

In the late 18th century, Great Britain prevailed over the Netherlands (the dominant power of the period), while France, the other contender, who went to war against the Netherlands, never became a superpower.

In the early 20th century, the United States prevailed over Great Britain largely because of the wars between the United Kingdom and its other rival, Germany.

Another lesson is that empires collapse when they can no longer afford to finance the security of their hinterlands and trade routes.

Spain's Golden Age came to an end when it could no longer fund the military expenditure required to defend its colonies.

Great Britain's empire depended on naval supremacy that could not be maintained. The Soviet Union fell because it confused greatness with over-armament.

Golden age

A third lesson is that, even when civilizations are set up for success, they can collapse under the weight of unforced errors.

For example, at the start of the 20th century, the West seemed primed for prosperity: with

the advent of electrification, the automobile, the telephone, the radio, and air travel, technological progress was accelerating, while the vicious cycle of poverty and war appeared to be broken.

Global trade was booming (particularly between Great Britain and Germany), democracy was advancing (even in Russia, where the 1905 revolution heralded a new era of freedom), and European rulers were on good terms – George V was a first cousin of Wilhelm II and Nicholas I (who were third cousins).

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But World War I disrupted this golden age. Inventions designed to liberate mankind became weapons of destruction, and the illusion of progress died in the trenches.

For decades, Europe convulsed with war and hatred, unbearable humiliation, and barbaric revenge. Despite the certainty that this time would be different, the continent went up in flames.

The worst-case scenario is unfolding

The world is experiencing something similar today: We should be on the cusp of a prosperous future. Never has humanity's potential been so immense.

The shift to cleaner power could bring the fossil-fuel era to a close. Scientific breakthroughs could drastically change our lives by curing diseases that have defied treatment, developing a near-limitless source of clean energy, freeing humans from the most arduous tasks, and much more.

Many countries have recognized the importance of addressing climate change and protecting the planet.

Millions of hectares – from Kivu to the Amazon – are being reforested. The High Seas Treaty seeks to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030.

Banks are incorporating biodiversity considerations into their balance sheets. GDP is slowly giving way to other measures that value health, equality, and well-being.

The world's youth are making themselves heard, women are gaining access to decision-making positions, and societies, acutely aware that they face shared challenges, are engaging in dialogue.

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And yet, as in the beginning of the 20th century, the worst-case scenario is unfolding.

Authoritarianism has become ever more widespread, subverting even the most established democracies.

If we are not careful, AI could destroy **billions of jobs**, power new weapons, and erode cognitive skills.

The environment continues to deteriorate, and the **climate crisis** is deepening, owing to the millions of tons of greenhouse-gas emissions still being released into the atmosphere.

Rising sea levels, drying rivers, and failing crops have forced millions of people to migrate. Wars are multiplying around the world, and conflicts over food and water are set to rise.

We must not forget the lessons of the past

Most **democratic governments** are paralyzed,

postponing necessary reforms until after the next election.

As globalization comes under attack, fear of the other, nostalgia for a nonexistent purity, and disdain for knowledge have resurfaced.



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This has resulted in division, exclusion, and mistrust – the conditions on which populism thrives. Collective intelligence gives way to individual anger, exactly as occurred at the beginning of the 20th century.

More worryingly, and with no precedent, we face common challenges – climate change, poverty, epidemic risks, and misuse of technology, in particular AI – that affect humanity as such.

Saturated with screens and video games, and still obsessed with national rivalry, we forget to think about the global future and allow powerful national interests to dominate policymaking. This is how civilizations die. This is how human civilization may die.

To avert this outcome, we must not forget the lessons of the past. We must understand that it is time to think as one human species and to fight common challenges.

We must build on global cooperation and not the geopolitical selfishness of nation-states. The interests of future generations should come first, which implies a new emphasis on altruism.

Perhaps one day we will look back at 2025 as

the year when humanity could have taken a turn for the worse, but instead, for the first time in centuries, chose life.

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