

# 1

## What is the Worst?

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The worst is not  
So long as we can say “This is the worst.”

SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR*

*Cassandra. Chicken Little. The Boy Who Cried Wolf.* We have ways of talking about those who talk too much about the worst that can happen. And who could say now that the sky is falling? By virtually every quantitative measure of prosperity, humanity has never had it better. The world’s wealth has increased more than five-fold in the last fifty years, and more than fifteen-fold in the last century.<sup>1</sup> Life expectancy at birth has never been higher; the chances of dying a violent death have never been lower.<sup>2</sup> Poverty, malnourishment, disease—all threaten humans less now than ever before.<sup>3</sup> Has there ever been a worse time to talk about the worst case?

Cassandras and boys who cry wolf worry most when others worry least. In the stories we tell of them, they are not wrong to do so. Troy falls; the wolf arrives. Their trouble is not excessive fear (or hope), but the difficulty of anticipating and discussing drastic change. Even when we are right to switch from hope to fear, it is hard to get the timing right; even when individuals get the timing right, it is hard for them to persuade others to join them. How would we know whether there has been a worse time to talk about the worst case? Our prosperity alone is not conclusive evidence.

Modernity began with the claim that there is never a bad time to talk about the worst.<sup>4</sup> Before the sixteenth century humans commonly believed that what was outside of their control worked ultimately in their interests. *Hubris* or pride—mistrusting the gods by taking matters into one’s own hands—was sin, the source of human misery. But this fundamental claim came into doubt. If there were no force outside of humanity looking out for human happiness, the first modern philosophers argued, better for mankind to look out for itself. As the civilization-wide attempt to decrease human vulnerability has progressed, responsibility for “crisis management” has shifted from the church to the state. Now, not priests but bureaucrats are entrusted with authority to contemplate

and prepare for misfortunes. “Emergency management” and “crisis response” are conceived as subjects in which one can acquire expertise and scientific mastery. If things have never been better, perhaps it is thanks to those who have thought—and still think—about nothing but the worst.

All of the big-picture gains in human prosperity notwithstanding, a number of recent crises have called into doubt our capacity to anticipate and respond adequately to worst cases. Some of these disasters have been natural—Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Others, like the recent “Great Recession,” have been man-made. Still others, like the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear plant, arose from nature’s interaction with man-made systems. Each was a unique event unto itself, and each had its own consequences—not only humanitarian, but political, economic, and spiritual. What do they share? For an earlier age all would have served as reminders of the limits of human power. For us, they are prods to further planning.

The goal of this volume is to learn what worst cases have to teach. Each of the following chapters will consider what U.S. policy should be in the event of a worst-case scenario. Some of these scenarios are more probable than others. Climate change seems likely; the zombie apocalypse seems less so (as of this writing). Some scenarios are located in the future, raising the question of what policymakers can do now to prepare and prevent. Others are located in the past, forcing policymakers to consider how to repair and restore after the worst has come to pass. All test our normal assumptions about U.S. foreign policy and policymaking. This introductory chapter raises the questions to which subsequent chapters will respond.

## **I. U.S. Foreign Policy and Regional “Worst Cases”**

For as long as anyone living today can remember, U.S. foreign policymakers have enjoyed a best-case scenario. With about five percent of the world’s population and seven percent of its land, the United States has commanded about twenty percent of the world’s wealth and, recently, a considerably greater portion of its military power.<sup>5</sup> The United States also has not had to fear an invasion of its territory and has succeeded in preventing serious security threats from emerging overseas. A position of such strength is an aberration in world-historical terms, and many U.S. strategists fear that it is now waning. Well into the nineteenth century, China and India accounted for more than half of the world’s population and its wealth; today, they account for about a third of world population and about a fifth of global wealth.<sup>6</sup> If economic growth in

India, China, and elsewhere restores something like the relation between population and wealth that obtained before the Industrial Revolution, the United States' economic power will decrease significantly in relative terms even if its wealth continues to increase in absolute terms.<sup>7</sup> And U.S. military power seems likely to follow in tow. Against this backdrop, crises that might not have worried a previous generation of U.S. policymakers seem rather more foreboding.

As of this writing, each of the regions traditionally considered vital to U.S. national security interests—Asia, Europe, and the Middle East—has confronted new levels of instability, many of which have already raised real-world worst-case scenarios. In Asia, China's economic growth continues to raise the prospect of a revised regional balance of power, particularly as China translates economic into military might. What should U.S. policy be in the event of a Chinese military effort to overturn the existing Asian order? The European order—a German and French entente at the core of a united continent—has proven more durable than many had anticipated in the immediate wake of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> But the recent recession and Russia's encroachments into Eastern Europe have caused some to question whether European nations are truly capable of coordinating their economic and military policy. While the United States' stake in maintaining a unified Europe is commonly acknowledged, its support measures might at some future point fall short: How then would U.S. policymakers respond to European disunion, whether driven by market pressures or by separatist movements (such as those active in the UK and Spain)? More pressingly, how should the United States respond to Russian aggression and the very real possibility that a new Cold War is in the offing? Will China and Russia form a new partnership, spreading the model of authoritarian state-led development? By contrast to Asia and Europe, worst-case scenarios in the Middle East require little imagination. The U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and a resurgence in violence between Israel and Palestine have all contributed to a moment of profound flux. These recent events have further complicated longstanding policy problems, among them Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. What should U.S. policy be amidst the now-unfolding "worst case" of regional instability? In light of this instability, how would U.S. policymakers respond to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons?

Latin America and Africa figure in U.S. foreign policy as settings for vexing humanitarian crises more than great-power rivalry (except by proxy).<sup>9</sup> The strength of Latin American drug cartels, however, raises not only humanitarian, but political, economic, and national-security challenges for the United States,

in large part owing to the blurry line between domestic and foreign drug policy. U.S. domestic demand for drugs drives international supply, and instability in Latin America frequently drives immigrants to U.S. borders, as well as across, over, and under them. In several regions within Latin America, the line between state and cartel is similarly blurry. Will Latin American regimes decay to the point where democratic institutions lose legitimacy and the coherence of the state itself comes into question? Should an actual narco-state arise—should drug cartels come to possess a monopoly of violence and extractive power within an expansive region—how should the United States respond?

Questions regarding U.S. intervention arise not only during a crisis, but before and after a crisis takes place. 2014 marked the twentieth year since Rwanda's genocide, perhaps the most dramatic recent case of U.S. non-intervention in a humanitarian crisis. Whether and what kind of U.S. intervention could have stopped the killing is still hotly debated. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Rwandan genocide, seen with hindsight, is the success of Rwanda during those twenty years. And this raises a question for U.S. policymakers to consider, in addition to the vital one of how best to prevent future genocides: What role should the United States play after a humanitarian crisis of Rwandan proportions? What lessons can be learned from not only the fearsome events of recent Rwandan history but also the hopeful Rwandan response to them, and what implications do these lessons hold for U.S. policy toward Africa more broadly?

## II. Worst Case Studies

When scholars and statesmen refer to the present as an age of “globalization,” they invoke a number of related developments. In part, they refer to the integration of markets through trade and, in part, to the integration of nations into a single moral community.<sup>10</sup> The first is credited with increasing global wealth and reducing global poverty; the second, with increasing awareness of—if not always action against—abuses of human rights. Both are generally understood to be positive developments.

But globalization has also raised unfamiliar challenges. As previously discrete entities—nations, sub-national groups, individuals—have become linked to one another, both goods and evils have become more difficult to contain. Crises in seemingly remote parts of the world are, increasingly, global concerns. Also, as critics of market economies have pointed out for centuries, economic integration and its attendant specialization increase dependency as surely as

they increase wealth; an advanced nation that must import food to feed its population or oil to power its factories, for instance, can be wealthy and needy at once. As systems increase in complexity, they do not always increase in resiliency. Is globalization, like a house of cards, most impressive immediately prior to its collapse? The answer to this question depends in large part on policymakers' ability to anticipate and overcome a range of unprecedented worst-cases.

Many troubling scenarios arise from the sheer complexity of global systems. The recent economic downturn, for instance, revealed that disruptions in one sector of one nation's economy—in this case, the U.S. housing market—can have a vast impact on the whole. While the fallout from this crisis seems now to have been contained—in 2009 global GDP dipped for the first time since 1946, but rebounded rapidly—the “great recession” is unlikely to be the last worst case to threaten the global economy.<sup>11</sup> What lessons should be learned from the great recession? As globalization has attenuated national borders, the Platonic ideal of a globalized world—the virtually borderless virtual world of the Internet—has emerged as an increasingly vital venue for trade and communication. With all of the benefits of freely flowing information comes the difficulty of preventing proprietary information (whether personal passwords, trade secrets, or classified intelligence) from falling into the wrong hands. Various forms of private and public cyber crime are already a pressing problem, and yet scholars of cyber security warn that the worst is yet to come. What would a “cyber Pearl Harbor” look like, and how would U.S. policymakers respond to it?

If the economic downturn and the challenge of cyber security suggest the difficulty of controlling complex man-made systems, climate change reveals the difficulty of controlling nature, a system of even greater complexity. Recent reports have stressed that climate change is not only a future prospect but a present reality, the implications of which are understood only imperfectly.<sup>12</sup> It seems, as of this writing, that most states' efforts to improve resiliency are inadequate, that climate change is likely to have profound geostrategic as well as humanitarian effects, and that the global poor will suffer considerably more than the better-off.<sup>13</sup> But what else can we discern about the world that climate change will usher in, and how can confronting this scenario improve policy in the present? Outside of a rather narrow band of the earth's surface, human beings have always had to adapt to a hostile climate by inventing forms of clothing, shelter, and food production. Until quite recently, however, humans have had less success inventing modes of resistance to microorganisms. Since agriculture first allowed urbanization, a series of pandemics have killed millions until the human body developed its own resistance, with little help from human

ingenuity. This changed in the late nineteenth century, and since that time rates of infectious disease have plummeted.<sup>14</sup> But there is reason to worry that this happy period is drawing to a close. Increased urbanization across the globe, combined with the intermingling of populations through international migration, tourism, and trade, have created conditions comparable to those that preceded prior plagues.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, antibiotics have come to be used so widely that potent drug-resistant strains of disease have emerged. The institutional infrastructure to combat global pandemic is now well-established—both the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization having been founded in the wake of World War II—but has yet to confront a crisis equivalent to historical plagues. What would happen in the event of a truly global pandemic?

In addition to heightening the risks that arise from complex man-made and natural systems, the integration of the post-Cold War world seems to have made the “worst case” of nuclear proliferation more likely while making military coups less so. Counter-proliferation has become more challenging owing to lowered technological barriers for entry, the emergence of supply networks that are difficult to detect due in part to the volume of international trade, and the resulting increase in available nuclear material and know-how. These factors have increased the likelihood of both “nuclear cascade,” a scenario in which new nuclear states (such as Iran or North Korea) cause others (such as Saudi Arabia or Japan) to acquire nuclear capabilities, and nuclear terrorism. Nuclear cascade might not be catastrophic, some argue, because historically nuclear weapons have raised the stakes of international competition and served, on the whole, as a stabilizing force.<sup>16</sup> Nuclear terrorism is more troubling, because the stabilizing effects of states’ desire to avoid destruction do not necessarily apply to elusive terrorist networks, much less to individual terrorists themselves. What would the “worst case” of nuclear terrorism look like in practice, and how should U.S. policymakers respond? Peaceful uses of nuclear power have their own “worst cases” as well, as the recent disaster in Fukushima, Japan reminds us. If globalization has made nuclear proliferation more troubling and nuclear power disasters more salient, it seems to have made military coups both rarer and less harmful to democratization.<sup>17</sup> While military coups have historically posed a significant threat to democratic regimes, the frequency of military coups has fallen, from just under six per year from 1960 to 1990, to just over three from 1991 to 2004. Many of these post-Cold War coups have occurred within democracies, but relatively few have derailed democratization: In most post-Cold War coups, in fact, competitive elections follow within five years.<sup>18</sup>

These findings have led some political scientists and commentators to call for a revision to the United States' policy of suspending aid to states established by military coups.<sup>19</sup> How, then, should U.S. policymakers respond to the "worst case" known to scholars of civil-military relations, the military coup? In light of ongoing events in Egypt and Thailand, this scenario is far from fictional.

Nevertheless, there is something essentially fictional about the worst case scenario. Cases that accord with our everyday experience of the world are easy to anticipate; they are less likely than outliers, black swans, and unknown unknowns to disrupt our plans and policies.<sup>20</sup> A "worst case," however, is as much a subjective experience as an objective reality; it is constituted in large part by the surprise and fear that one feels when confronted by an unforeseen threat. For the policymaker, learning to respond properly to the emotional experience of the worst case is as important as discovering what novel crises might conceivably arise.

For this reason, poetic and prophetic accounts of the end times are as valuable to the modern "crisis manager" as they were to the pre-modern person of faith, albeit for different reasons. Whereas apocalyptic literature reminded pre-modern man of his subordinate place in the whole and helped to align his hopes and fears accordingly, it reminds modern man of present limits on his mastery—of himself and his surroundings—so that he might better extend his mastery in the future. We train our hearts and minds for the worst reality has to offer by our encounters with the worst we can imagine.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that fictional accounts of zombie apocalypses have captured the attention of so many. The international relations scholar Daniel Drezner, in his timely work *Theories of International Relations and Zombies*, reports that more than one-third of all zombie films have been released within the last decade alone, while scholarly publications on the zombie apocalypse have increased exponentially since the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> The popularity of zombie stories has a number of causes, to be sure, but their place in the education of the "crisis manager" stems from the special properties that fictional worst cases have. They extend our emotional range and our imaginative reach better than real-world cases.

And perhaps these stories serve, still, to suggest the ultimate limits of our power to master the world around us. The gods cursed Cassandra to issue futile warnings, and in doing so revealed the inherent difficulty of persuading others to abandon expectations based on the normal run of events. Chicken Little was wrong to think the sky was falling, but her mistaken belief was based on real evidence that managed to convince not only herself—and who is to say that

the sky couldn't fall, or some other worst case couldn't violate our expectations as dramatically?<sup>22</sup> The boy who cried wolf was certainly not the first to covet the attention that comes to those who speak confidently of the worst that can happen, particularly when widespread prosperity coincides with anxiety and uncertainty. The difficulties that attend discussions of the worst case seem intractable—even more so, perhaps, than lost wars, falling skies, or wolves at the gates. So long as we can say what the worst is, we are better off than we could be. But can we ever say the worst that can happen?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For data on world GDP, see Angus Maddison, "Historical Statistics of the World Economy: 1–2008 a.d.," [http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical\\_Statistics/horizontal-file\\_02-2010.xls](http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical_Statistics/horizontal-file_02-2010.xls).

<sup>2</sup>For data on life expectancy, see The United Nations, "World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision," <http://esa.un.org/wpp/>. Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2011) details the decline in violence.

<sup>3</sup>The World Bank reports that global rate of extreme poverty fell by half between 1990 and 2010; see The World Bank, "Poverty Overview" (updated April 6, 2015), <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview#1>. For information on malnourishment, see the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), et al., *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: The Multiple Dimensions of Food Security* (Rome: FAO, 2013), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3434e/i3434e00.htm>, which reports that the total number of undernourished people has fallen 17 percent since 1990–92 (8). For information on disease, see the World Health Organization (WHO), *World Health Statistics 2014* (Geneva: WHO, 2014), [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112738/1/9789240692671\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112738/1/9789240692671_eng.pdf?ua=1), particularly the discussions of progress towards health-related Millennium Development Goals (11–34) and infectious disease (93–103).

<sup>4</sup>The following discussion focuses on modernity and premodernity in the West. For a consideration of the quite different experience of philosophical modernity within Eastern thought, see, for instance, Harold Coward, *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>For data on the U.S. share of global wealth, see Maddison, "Historical Statistics of the World Economy: 1–2008 A.D." [http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical\\_Statistics/horizontal-file\\_02-2010.xls](http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical_Statistics/horizontal-file_02-2010.xls). On the U.S. share of global military power, see Anup Shah's summary of the Stockholm International Peace Research Initiative (SIPRI) data: "World Military Spending" (updated June 30, 2013), <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending>.

<sup>6</sup>Maddison, "Historical Statistics of the World Economy: 1–2008 A.D.," [http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical\\_Statistics/horizontal-file\\_02-2010.xls](http://www.ggd.net/maddison/Historical_Statistics/horizontal-file_02-2010.xls). For discussion and application to China and India, see "More 2,000 Years in a Single Graphic," *The Economist* (June 20, 2012), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/06/mis-charting-economic-history>.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>For doubts about the stability of the durability of the post-Cold War European order see, for instance, John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic* 266: 35–50 (August 1990), <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0014.pdf>.



<sup>9</sup>It is possible that Chinese investment in Africa might someday make this continent an arena for more direct great-power confrontation. For comment, see Howard French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), and Christopher Alessi and Stephanie Hanson, "Expanding China-Africa Oil Ties," *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder* (February 8, 2012), <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-africa/p9557#>.

<sup>10</sup>On globalization as an economic phenomenon, see for instance Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005), 8–11, and Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), esp. 19 and 40–57. On globalization as a moral phenomenon, see in particular Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), esp. ix, 148, 150–95, as well as the works of cosmopolitan critics of John Rawls' political thought, such as Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), and Martha Nussbaum, "Beyond the Social Contract: Capabilities and Global Justice," in *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Gillian Brock and Harry Brighouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>For economic data, see the Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2014*, s.v. "Economy: World," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html>. On the recurrence of financial crises, see especially Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, *This Time is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), <http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/report/>.

<sup>13</sup>Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) Military Advisory Board, *National Security and the Accelerating Risks of Climate Change* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2014), <http://www.cna.org/reports/accelerating-risks>.

<sup>14</sup>William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).

<sup>15</sup>According to U.N. statistics, more than half the world's population lived in cities in 2014, as compared to thirty percent in 1950. See Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2012 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2013), <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/Default.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup>For the argument that nuclear weapons stabilize international relations, see especially Kenneth Waltz's contributions in Scott Douglas Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, Third Edition (New York: Norton, 2012), and Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91: 2–5 (July/August 2012), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-the-bomb>.

<sup>17</sup>On the frequency of military coups, see Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 48: 249–59. On military coups' effect on democratizations, see Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans, "Coups and Democracy," *British Journal of Political Science* 44 (October 2014): 799–825, and Thyne and Powell, "Coup d'état or Coup d'Autocracy? How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950–2008," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 2 (2016): 192–213.

<sup>18</sup>Marinov and Goemans, "Coups and Democracy."

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, Joshua Keating, “Should We Always Oppose Military Coups?” *Slate* (June 5, 2014), [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_world\\_/2014/06/05/should\\_we\\_always\\_oppose\\_military\\_coups.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_world_/2014/06/05/should_we_always_oppose_military_coups.html).

<sup>20</sup>On “black swans,” see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2010). The phrase “unknown unknowns” originated in a February 2002 press conference by then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

<sup>21</sup>Daniel Drezner, *Theories of International Relations and Zombies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup>The likelihood of a catastrophic asteroid strike is a favorite topic among scholars of worst-case scenarios. See, for instance, Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 175–7, and chap. 2, “The Sky Could Be Falling: Globally Relevant Disasters and the Perils of Probabilism;” also see Richard Posner, *Catastrophe: Risk and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially 24–9 and 173–81.