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# The New North: the World in 2050

By Laurence C Smith

The intensifying struggle for natural resources.

REVIEWED BY [JOHN GRAY](#) | PUBLISHED 31 MARCH 2011



## The New North: the World in 2050

Laurence C Smith

Profile Books, 336pp, £20

It is easier to know what cannot be than to foretell what will be. There was never any possibility that Iraq would become a secular democracy: toppling Hussein meant destroying a secular regime, however despotic, while post-invasion politics was bound to reflect sectarian divisions. Similarly, there was never the remotest prospect of post-communist Russia becoming a western-style economy; 70 years of Soviet rule had produced a military-industrial rustbelt, lacking rudimentary preconditions of a viable market system.

More recently, Afghanistan was never going to turn into anything resembling a liberal democracy. Unlike Saddam's Iraq, a modern tyranny, Afghanistan had never been a modern state. Even Soviet forces, far more ruthless than the western allies are today, could not create such a state where none had existed. As so often, the allies went beyond their initial objective of disabling terrorist bases, it was clear that they, too, would be defeated.

Failure in each of these projects was preordained, not because of any mistakes that would inevitably be made while implementing them, but because the projects aimed to achieve were inherently unrealisable. The fiascos that ensued were predictable and widely predicted, but that did not prevent the launch of the projects or the vast waste of lives and resources that pursuing them entailed. Here, we come up against one of the largest obstacles to charting the future: the inexhaustible irrationality of human institutions. Whether they are taken by governments or markets, churches or corporations, vital decisions affecting millions of people quite often rest on assumptions that are totally unrealistic. Wildly unreasonable beliefs about what is possible and practicable are the stuff of politics.

Laurence C Smith is a geographer, and the core of this consistently challenging and mind-opening exercise in futurology is formed from foreseeable shifts in climate and the dwindling availability of natural resources. Along with population movements and advancing urbanisation, Smith suggests, these forces of global warming and resource scarcity will drive development in the world's NORCs (northern rim countries). Canada, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, the northern regions of Russia and the United States will become zones of rapid economic growth and increasing strategic importance.

As rising sea levels make America's southern coastal regions uninhabitable and turn much of Spain into desert, Alberta and Sweden will experience inflow of capital and immigrants. With the Arctic sea ice retreating, the polar cap's underwater wealth - notably its large deposits of oil and natural gas - will be available for exploitation. The global axis is tilting not from west to east and north to south as many have argued, but instead towards "the new north", the next phase of development.

Because it acknowledges global warming, resource scarcity and population expansion as powerful drivers of the world that is coming into being, Smith's is a more realistic vision than the fantasy of endless growth on which present policies are founded. Free-market economists imagine that growth can go on for ever if the right price mechanisms are in place - if oil spikes to \$200 a barrel we are not to worry, they say, because high prices will intensify the search for alternative sources of energy and the global economy will soon be back on a steady, upward path. Anti-capitalists take essentially the same line, insisting that co-operation can overcome scarcity in a more equitable economic system.

Yet natural resources are irrevocably finite; the limits to growth will be reached, however just or unjust the economic system is judged to be. Nor does it matter how efficiently markets are operating. The limits to growth are imposed by the very planet. Industrial civilisation made possible the levels of human population the planet supports today, but cheap oil is running out. The entire world is hooked on a resource that is depleting faster than any economic or political transformation imaginable.

Smith captures the situation in an enlightening thought-experiment. "What if you could play God," he asks, "and do the noble, ethically fair thing by converting the entire developing world's level of material consumption to that now carried out by North Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Australians today. Would you do it? It is clear what the answer should be. The effect of such an instant upgrading of living standards would be that "global consumption would rise elevenfold. It would be as if the world's population went from under seven billion today to 72 billion. Where would all that meat, fish, water, energy, plastic, metal and wood come from?" If the thought-experiment is modified, and we imagine the upgrading taking place gradually over the next 40 years, the result is even worse. "If the standard of living for everyone on earth is to be as Americans, western Europeans, Japanese and Australians do today, then the natural world must step up to provide enough to support the equivalent of 105 billion people."

Clearly, a world of this kind is wholly unsustainable - and yet it is the end goal implicit in nearly all prevailing policy. Probably the only way that environmental collapse might be staved off now is by bold recourse to hi-tech strategies, as Stewart Brand has argued lately in *Whole Earth Discipline*. But Brand's advocacy of high technology is anathema to greens, and governments are unwilling to make the large capital investments that a hi-tech programme requires. Scornful of technical fixes, contemporary thinking remains attached to delusional projects of world transformation. Most people know, or secretly suspect, that these projects will come to nothing. But coping with intractable realities is hard, and it is easier to imagine that these realities can somehow be conjured away. So we are left with human irrationality, and the prospect of endemic conflict.

Among the ground rules Smith lays down for his exercise in futurology is "no World War III". If this means there will be no recurrence of the industrial war of the 20th century, it is a reasonable stipulation. Where states possess nuclear weapons, full-scale warfare becomes unimaginably destructive. On the other hand, resource war could well become a chronic condition.

Smith dismisses the suggestion that armed conflict could develop from rivalries over control of northern natural resources as "hype about mad scrambles at looming Arctic wars". Yet the first Gulf war was a resource war pure and simple, and seizing control of the country's oil was one of the imperatives that led to the invasion of Iraq. There seems no reasonable ground for thinking that resource war will not be the pattern in the future, as in the past.

Exactly how such conflicts will play out is what Donald Rumsfeld described as a "known unknown", but intensifying struggles for control over shrinking natural resources can be clearly foreseen. For Smith, however, resource war seems to belong in a category Rumsfeld did not mention - the unknown knowns, real things which we are aware of, but that we prefer not to think about.

*John Gray is lead reviewer of the NS.  
His latest book is "The Immortalization Commission" (Allen Lane, £18.99)*



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THU, 2012-06-14 16:09 — NATHAN REDD (NOT VERIFIED)

Considering the great value of this article alone, I find it useful and need to add something on my own. First of all, the reasoning is quite an essential thing to consider before talking about the straight facts, or facts which might seem obvious more cum. But it should be mandatory to cite various external sources used and to cite them properly. While this might look a bit pushy and directive

hostely, it should be a primary thing to look at after reading any article. Thank you for your trial.



MON, 2011-04-04 08:08 — [ANIRUDDHA G. KULKARNI](#)

Arithmetic in the thought experiment of Mr. Smith can be challenged.

'.. The effect of such an instant upgrading of living standards would be that "global consumption would rise elevenfold. It would be as if the world's population went from under seven billion today to 72 billion. Where would all that meat, fish, water, energy, plastic, metal and wood come from?"...'

The multiplier implied here is  $72 / 7$  i.e. 10.28.

Jared Diamond says: "...A real problem for the world is that each of us 300 million Americans consumes as much as 32 Kenyans. With 10 times the population, the United States consumes 320 times more resources than Kenya does..."

Assuming the population split between developing and developed economies as 80:20, the multiplier should be around 25.8.

<http://searchingforlaugh.blogspot.com>

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