Asking the right questions and pursuing the answers energetically can change your life and the course of history. An example of a very basic question for world affairs is this: What forms of human behavior are diminishing the chances of human survival?

Here is one part of an answer. From 1990 to the present, the government of the United States pursued policies in the Middle East that extinguished more than a million lives and devastated millions more. Culminating in the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, these policies will probably cost the United States more than three trillion dollars, based on a recent estimate.

In this chapter of human history, we find a technologically advanced society, which considers itself a “leader” in world affairs, directing a large part of its public resources into the destruction of another society at a time when its own public infrastructure is in a process of decay. Bridges and other physical structures need renewal in the United States, and social programs such as health care lag significantly behind those of other countries with far
more limited economic means. Instead of directing public policies and public resources into creating and restoring essential physical infrastructure and services, the U.S. government has directed those policies and resources to the destruction of Iraq’s bridges, health care system, and other objects necessary for the well-being of the Iraqi civilian population.

How could the political leadership in any society of *Homo sapiens* behave with such ignorance and incompetence? When will they ever learn? If this form of behavior is characteristic of human beings, we can reasonably assume it is diminishing our chances of survival.

The self-destructive patterns of behavior are rooted in self-destructive patterns of thinking and the institutions that sustain the process. Patterns of thinking can be referred to as *maps* or *paradigms*. I use the terms almost interchangeably in this essay.

*Homo so-called sapiens* has often shown a remarkably limited capacity to change self-destructive patterns of behavior. The observation is a central theme in Jared Diamond’s book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* and in Ronald Wright’s *A Short History of Progress*. A careful observer can find abundant evidence of the same limitation in our own society.

Thomas Kuhn found it even among scientists. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) gives an account of the process of paradigm shift in the natural sciences. When evidence emerged in a scientific field that simply did not fit the old paradigm, a new paradigm would be proposed that could accommodate all the available evidence. Yet the new paradigm was often accepted only when the old generation of scientists was displaced by a new generation that “faced the facts.” Instead of accepting the necessary paradigm shift, the establishment, even in the natural sciences, would sometimes cling to the familiar way of understanding the world.

The resistance to evidence is probably much greater in politics than in the natural sciences. New generations have a choice between
facing the evidence or having a lucrative job with an institution that repudiates the evidence. And there are always plenty of young people who will take the jobs. Thus the old paradigm persists, and well-paid human behavior moves all of us toward Option B.

The old paradigm is associated with militant nationalism. It holds that militarism is necessary to protect the citizens of the militarist state. The fallacy in this concept is clear from the historical record. Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) provides an account of how militant nationalist states again and again drove themselves to bankruptcy by playing the fool’s game of militant nationalist competition.

Beyond a certain point, investment in what is called “defense” produces insidiously or rapidly diminishing returns, undermining the security of citizens in the militarist state even as it destabilizes the global community. Militarily powerful states have long since passed the point of diminishing returns for investment in defense. Political leaders in these states fail to understand the limits of their maps. The map that emphasizes national defense has critical limits, and if those limits are overlooked, each additional increment of expenditure on military will further undermine the public interest. The old paradigm has long been dangerously obsolete.

There is another way of thinking about these matters, a new paradigm, which recognizes the limits of the old paradigm. *The new paradigm asserts that our security depends on government compliance with international law.* It is based on recognition of the need for a healthy global community under a rule of law. This is absolutely essential to human security in every state.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the power of the paradigm. It limits or expands what we can learn from history and what we understand about ourselves. The conflict between the old paradigm of nationalism and the new paradigm of global community under a rule of international law has been evolving for more than a century. Anyone who is even slightly aware of the history of the twentieth century knows how tenacious the old paradigm has
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been. Making the paradigm shift is something to which each of us can contribute.

Who are we?

The first person plural is a political minefield. In our discussions of world events, are the words “we,” “us,” and “our” inclusive or exclusive? Do they refer to us as human beings or to an us-versus-them concept such as “us Americans”? The concept that the destruction of civilian life in Iraq is not affecting “us” is an example of the second (old paradigm, Option B) use of the term. Emotions, including empathy, are integral to political events. Failing to understand this guarantees failure as measured by the standards of responsible global citizenship put forward in this book.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, commercial airliners slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A few hours after the attacks, I saw the tape of one of the planes cruising like a missile toward then colliding with the tower, and the instant, irrevocable inferno. People like me were being suffocated, vaporized, crushed, and incinerated in the moments depicted by that tape, and I was utterly powerless to help them.

A telephone call from Kevin Cosgrove to a 911 operator has been posted on the Internet. Kevin was a young man trapped on the 105th floor of one of the World Trade Center towers. At the time of this writing, the text as well as a combined audio/video recording related to this call can be retrieved (search using the young man’s name). Read the text or watch and listen to the video, and notice your own emotions and thoughts as you experience this. It affects me first at the level of a very strong emotion (empathy). Once I get past that, as I must, I move to a more analytical level, which recognizes my responsibility to change the conditions that led to the horror. In this analytical mode, I set aside my emotions as well as I can so as to contribute as effectively as possible to an optimal outcome. If you have no empathy in such situations, or if you think it is irrelevant,
or if you respond emotionally only when the victims are Americans, or if you see no personal responsibility in connection with these things, then you are different from me in an important way. And that difference will influence how you experience the 911 call, as well as how you react to this book.

It is too late for all those whose lives were lost in the political violence of September 11, 2001 and for those who died in the cycles of political violence that led to those attacks. Rage, ignorance, indifference, and old-paradigm thinking will make it too late for hundreds of millions more.

Political leaders and their experts missed the point. After the attacks of September 11, prestigious sources began to suggest that the attacks were sufficient justification for war. Violence would help solve the problem of violence. If we fought them over there, we would not have to fight them here. The deaths resulting from subsequent U.S. attacks on Afghanistan soon surpassed the death toll from the attacks of September 11.

Even so, the danger of “terrorism” and other threats to us were not extinguished. This was used as part of the rationalization for invading Iraq in March 2003. According to a report in The Lancet in October 2004 (Roberts et al.), that invasion led within one year to the deaths of several tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, most of whom were women and children, and most killed by the invading military forces. Again, that civilian death toll dwarfed the tally from the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. But in the minds of old-paradigm thinkers, the civilian deaths in Iraq don’t count because they are not us.

Canadian journalist Paul William Roberts provides an intimate glimpse of a few minutes from that invasion of Iraq:

The soldier’s unit had been told to intercept a vehicle in which high-ranking Iraqi military personnel were thought to be traveling out of Baghdad.

“We lit that fucker up real good,” the soldier said.
“Blew the door clean off and the fuckers clean out … Asshole had his wife an’ kid with him too. L’il girl. She were standin’ there fuckin’ screamin’, man, an’ on fire. She were fuckin’ burnin’, man. We was laughin’ our fuckin’ heads off, man … Her face’s all black an’ she screamin’ … yeah! It were fuckin’ tasty, I tell ya!”

I waited for some kind of punch line, but that was it: blew up the car, set the little girl on fire, stood there watching her burn and laughing. The soldiers to whom he was relating this charming little tale of heroism found it appropriately amusing too. They said things like right-on and dang, then related anecdotes of their own experiences that day, all of which involved fuckers who got whacked or lit up. (Roberts 2004, 145)

If the little girl and her family and other Iraqis are part of us, then we are less secure today than we were before September 11, 2001. Obviously, with the more inclusive use of the first person plural, the invasion of Iraq is a threat to our security. Importantly and less obviously, the same is true even with the narrower usage. The patterns of human behavior that led to the invasion of Iraq will recur, threatening countless human lives in the future, and those who live in North America will not be immune.

The given reason for the invasion of Iraq was doubly dishonest. First, the actual purpose of the invasion was not “our” security at all, but regime change. The purpose was hegemony, not survival. Second, the invasion actually threatened our security because it was an assault on the rule of law in the global community, and like it or not, we are part of that community. The legacy of the invasion of Iraq, and the thinking that drove it, continues to threaten our security.

It was almost a century ago that “experts” and “leaders” promoted World War I as the “war to end all wars.” It wasn’t, it didn’t, and it won’t. Today the promotional tricks have changed; the thing being
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promoted is the same. War is not an instrument for ending warfare. For that purpose, a more intelligent use of the first person plural might help.

*Pathology of the old paradigm*

It is easy to conjecture at least one of the reasons why the American soldier who set the little girl and her family on fire might have had no immediate sense of having done anything wrong. He had been deeply indoctrinated in the paradigm of nationalism, which makes it okay to incinerate human beings. He probably knows that the political leaders of his own country and his commanding officers have no effective compunctions about such things; his actions are likely to go unpunished. For his own good, he should also know that the pronouncements of political leaders on security and defense issues are treacherous.

It is also easy to understand how political leaders and experts for more than a century have been such a miserable failure at providing human security in the global community. They too think within the box of the old paradigm.

There is an enormous gravitational pull keeping soldiers and political leaders, and the experts who serve them, inside the box. Cultural, political, and economic institutions have evolved within the nationalist paradigm. The economic power associated with it ties incomes, careers, and reputations to support for nationalism. This military-industrial-ideological-political complex demands loyalty. There can be dire personal consequences for innovative thinking.

In the old paradigm, security is provided by the nation-state’s military power. Sometimes referred to as “defense,” this militarism (whatever its defensive functions) becomes a threat to others. Within the nationalist state, “we” are taught to see only the threat that others pose to “us,” not the threat we pose to others. The result is predictable: a self-sustaining dynamic of violence.
Einstein had a concise formula for nationalism:

Nationalism, in my opinion, is none other than an idealistic rationalization for militarism and aggression. (quoted in Nathan and Norden, eds. 1960, 242)

Whether that sounds to you like E=mc² or more like 2+2=4, it’s a useful concept (depending on your purposes, of course). The national interest is not the public interest. The polarized and exclusive concept of power to be found in militant nationalism is toxic to democracy.

Non-state actors may also use violence, sometimes in response to nationalist state violence or in efforts to establish their own state. This stateless version of violence is selectively referred to as “terrorism” today, but the following standard definition of terrorism makes no such distinction: “The use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce, esp. for political purposes” (Random House 1987).

Our cultural institutions, driven by the old paradigm, emphasize the terrorism of non-state actors, and do so in a way intended to recruit public support for further violence — state violence operating within the old paradigm. The so-called war on terrorism has perpetuated the cycle of violence. Because the old paradigm is dominant, there are strained and sustained efforts to avoid the standard definition in public references to “terrorism.” The term political violence can be helpful in restoring the necessary awareness that violence of this kind can come from either state or non-state actors, and that such violence needs to be brought under control, no matter what the source.

In this plague of violence afflicting the global community, we find experts who tell us that there will never be a cure; in fact, that it is not even a disease. In presenting his call for a “robust nationalism,” Samuel Huntington writes:
Conservatives know that the end of one conflict creates the basis for another one. They agree with Robin Fox that wars are not a disease to be cured, but part of the normal human condition. They stem from what we are, not from some contingencies of what we do from time to time ("history"). They are, like religion and prostitution, basic responses to basic human fears and hopes. (1999:31–40)

Huntington’s statement illustrates the limitations of the old paradigm. The new paradigm expands the boundaries. Murder, rape, warfare, and cancer might all be considered "part of the normal human condition." Whether they can be reduced or eliminated at any given time or place is an empirical question. You have to make a relentless and serious effort to eliminate them if you have any serious interest in answering the question.

After centuries of waste and bloodshed, France and Germany have largely ceased to be a threat to one another and to other parts of Europe. Because of nuclear weapons and other factors that have more recently entered the equation (e.g. diminishing and contaminated natural resources, accelerating climate change, population growth, and economic turbulence), the global community may no longer have the luxury of the time that Europe took to learn the lesson.

Repeatedly, in personal lives and in communities, nationalism has intruded on healthier human responses to change. However difficult it may prove to be, a paradigm shift is essential to the future of human security. Today, our institutions remain locked into the old paradigm: the state will provide for “our” security. The evidence indicates that governments locked into this paradigm are undermining our security — whether the first person plural is used in the narrow or the broader sense. The new paradigm is in accord with that evidence.

Fortunately, there is evidence that the malignant version of nationalism may be drawing to a close. Its recurrent failures, its waste of human lives and resources, its destruction of the environment,
and the lies and hypocrisy necessary to sustain it are an open secret. How close to the tipping point we are remains to be seen.

The new paradigm and human options

In the darkest of times human beings are resilient. During my late wife’s illness with cancer, I witnessed her courage, tenacity, sense of humor, and relentless creative force. We have great resourcefulness even under harsh conditions, and we can access that capacity now, while time and resources are still in our favor.

Today the global community is afflicted with another form of cancer, the cancer of militant nationalist violence, in which we are both the disease-producing agents and the only hope for a cure. If we drive ourselves into the terminal stages of the disease, no doubt we will find our courage and resilience in those dark times. But why on earth should we not act now and steadily improve our options for the future?

It would be a mistake to underestimate the difficulty of curing this cancer, but a far greater mistake to think it is impossible. We are imposing this malady upon ourselves; therefore, it is within our power to stop it.

Fifty-eight years after Hiroshima, the world has to decide whether to continue on the path of cataclysmic violence charted in the twentieth century and now resumed in the twenty-first or whether to embark on a new, cooperative political path. It is a decision composed of innumerable smaller decisions guided by a common theme, which is weaning politics off violence. (Schell 2003, 386)

Optimism is a pragmatic necessity. Moreover, history gives good reason for optimism, as it records such achievements as the end of slavery, the mitigation of racism, improvement in the treatment of children, and the acceptance of women’s suffrage. History is also
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filled with countless setbacks and the collapse of civilizations. Life is difficult and does not go on forever. There will always be dark times ahead; we cannot have the light without the darkness. That’s the deal.

The rhetoric of politicians is a very poor indicator of our chances of finding a cure for the disease of militant nationalism. The best place to take a reading of our chances is within your own spirit and your own sense of responsibility for this task. If there is no hope there, where on earth will hope ever be found?