

Big Bad Dreams

Once again, TIE asked Washington's master catastrophist to lay out his most worrisome disaster scenarios. Here are the results.

BY MICHAEL LEDEEN

We catastrophists dream of moments like this. If we were quoted on the Big Board, our market caps would be soaring and we'd be voting big dividends. Suddenly everyone is in the market for disaster forecasts, the worse the better. Chemical, Biological and Nuclear are awaited with dread in every major world capital, and pundits openly wonder why the other terrorist shoe has not yet dropped.

Take it easy, gentle reader. None of us is truly oracular. The best can only warn of possible horrors, so that our leaders—who are paid to protect against worst-case scenarios, and not to take *de minimus* measures—can prepare and act. As in the past, these little ventures into nightmare must begin with the historian's warning: the past is not a reliable guide to the future, and the ancient curses and afflictions remain the most perilous.

So what should we most dread in the next twelve months? That is, aside from the looming horror of Boston repeating its unlikely victories in both the World Series and the Super Bowl?

MOTHER NATURE: THE ORIGINAL TERRORIST

You might think it was terrorism, but we often forget that the most devastating of all terrorists is Mother Nature. This has been a very good year for hurricanes, tornadoes, and typhoons, and here and there we see signs of renewed volcanic activity. Washington State is actively monitoring Mount St. Helens, and Italians worry about

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THE INTERNATIONAL
ECONOMY

THE MAGAZINE OF
INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POLICY

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Success Breeds Fear

Successful elections in Afghanistan are very bad news for the terror masters in Riyadh, Damascus, and Tehran.

Knowing they are hated by their own people, they fear that the emergence of stable and free societies in Afghanistan and Iraq will bring down their own tyrannical regimes. So they will certainly attempt more desperate measures against us and our allies in Iraq and in our home countries.

Etna. As you may have noticed, we are not very good at forecasting these catastrophes, even when they are fairly close by.

VIRUS VENGEANCE

Along with natural catastrophe, the other great scourge of mankind is disease. We have done well in recent years, especially with AIDS, but the most lethal epidemic in the last century was...the flu. So this year's shortage of flu vaccine might conceivably give the bugs a chance for a comeback. And don't forget mad cow disease. Since nobody knows its cause, it could crop up at any time. Meanwhile, the clock continues to tick on the marathon battle between the antibiotics and the bugs. Africa is the great incubator, since there, even more than in the industrial world, people stop taking medicine too soon, thereby giving the bugs the chance to adapt to the medicine and challenge us to come up with new defenses.

GREATEST HITS REPLAY

As we all know, human terrorism in the Middle East (and elsewhere, from Spain to Indonesia) has surged in the past twelve months, and there is no reason to expect a decline in the near future. Indeed, the successful elections in Afghanistan, and the unexpectedly big margin for John Howard in Australia, are very bad news for the terror masters in Riyadh, Damascus, and Tehran. Knowing they are hated by their own people, they fear that the emergence of stable and free societies in Afghanistan and Iraq will bring down their own tyrannical regimes. So they will certainly attempt more desperate measures against us and our allies in Iraq and in our home countries. Interference in America's November 2 elections amounted to little more than Osama bin Laden threatening "another Manhattan" via



U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JOSEPH P. COLLINS, JR.

videotape, but every terrorist expert I know worries about another attack inside America as the December holidays and the January presidential inauguration approach. And the Brits, the French (yes, the French), and the Italians are on round-the-clock alert, watching for (and rounding up) terrorists on their own soil.

What kind of terrorism, whether now or later? The odds heavily favor replays of their greatest hits, which are car and truck bombs, and airplanes-as-bombs. For a while, at least, al Qaeda was hoping to be able to take over a commercial aircraft flying from the United States to Europe, and then crash it into a European target. But that would be difficult, while it is much easier to rent an executive jet, load it up with a few suitcases stuffed with plastic explosives, and take it over once in flight. There is alarmingly little security at general aviation terminals, and precious little on board the luxury planes. So you can worry about that. The chemical, biological, and nuclear varieties of weapons are not very likely in our part of the world, but, as the Jordanians discovered

China in Trouble?

If you want economic and social catastrophe, China's the best chance. It's hard to get a handle on the Chinese economy—they invent their “data”—so predictions are uniquely unreliable. But hey, that's what catastrophists love the most. So please notice that several serious analysts have suggested that the Chinese banking system looks rather like Japan's on the eve of the bursting bubble: lots of bad loans, extensive graft, and a “family structure” wrecked by the disastrous “planning” system that has produced a surfeit of males. Some sociologists report a rebirth of polyandry—one wife, several husbands—in the countryside, and there's no particular reason it shouldn't spread into the cities as well. If that happens, and there's a significant depression, we could see a social upheaval that Dr. Masoch and Count De Sade would appreciate.

—M. Ledeen

a few months ago, al Qaeda and Hizbollah have chemical weapons and would love to use them against an American target or an American ally in the battle zone.

MISERY MISCELLANY

Quite aside from mass murder carried out by terrorists, there are numerous delicious scenarios for global misery. The runaway increase in oil prices hints at hard times ahead for “economies of transformation,” which means Europe and China first and foremost, and, albeit to a lesser extent, the United States. So far, so good, as even the stock market has shrugged it off. But over time, increased energy costs will lead to increased misery. Maybe not a catastrophe, but considerable suffering.

CHINA ACTION

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STUPID HUMAN TRICKS

Finally, there's old reliable: human stupidity. Given the effects of globalization, one dumb move by a major government or a monster corporation could have worldwide ripple effects. Idiot hackers are always looking for new ways to gum up the global works, and even a relatively short-term success could shut down half the world's computerized infrastructure. Hell, some of our enemies, most notably in the Orient, are constantly hacking into U.S. government computers, probing for weak points in the event of war. They might set off a digital chain reaction with the usual unforeseen consequences, from a massive shutdown of the world's airports and transportation systems to crises in hospitals and other health care centers.

FALSE PROPHET

But my absolute favorite is political/religious. There's a lot of hatred around the world today, and historically hate-driven peoples are easy prey for false messiahs and charismatic visionaries. We've already seen this with Osama bin Laden. He's a marginal player nowadays, but what if a new leader, perhaps calling himself the returned prophet of Shi'ism, the Twelfth Imam, suddenly came forward in India to rally the faithful to a truly massive jihad?

Now that would truly warm the heart of the catastrophists. ◆