



## Book Review

*The End Of The American Era* by Charles A. Kupchan  
Knopf, NY 2002.

Reviewed by Kalman Glantz

This book is predominantly an intelligent, thought-provoking, analysis of the current place of America in the world, but my review will focus on the author's attempt to embed his view of international relations in a theory of history. Unlike so many many historians, Kupchan knows that our species has an evolutionary history and he has tried to connect that history to his view of the current scene. For this we should be grateful. But we can wish that he had made the evolutionary theme more central to the book.

Kupchan's starting point is the notion, put forth by Francis Fukuyama (1992) among others, that a lasting era of great-power peace, based on America's primacy, has finally arrived. Kupchan argues that it is dangerous to mistake for a permanent peace "the temporary quiescence that usually follows resolution of a major geopolitical divide." Rivalry and conflict between the world's major powers will return. Those who take a "progressive" view of history—who think that things can and will get "better" indefinitely—are simply wrong. History is cyclical. What has been will be again (p. 304).

To make his point about the present and fu-

ture, Kupchan thinks it best to explore the past. For the most part, he turns to "those historical periods that can best shed light on the nature of our contemporary predicament," i.e., to moments in the history of civilization when immutable-looking established orders fell apart. This is the methodology of standard cultural history and is therefore not relevant to this review. Only near the end of the book, in a chapter entitled "The Rebirth of History" does he reach back in time to the early eons of human history.

What he does in this chapter is to show that each time a mode of production has been replaced by another, history has been set on a new course. He identifies five phases: nomadic; early agricultural; agricultural; industrial; and, interestingly, digital. Each mode of production is linked to a "dominant institution of governance" and a "dominant institution of communal identity." A change in the mode of production brings about instability and change in the political and social institutions, ending with the demise of the previous institutions. Hence, history is both progressive and cyclical. There has been technological advance, but there is also regression. Each new mode of subsistence has created great progress, but things will

not go on as before.

Kupchan believes that the digital revolution may well be this kind of historical breakpoint, one that is likely to bring an end to the American era. He sees it as contributing to the displacement of civic mindedness with a spirit of self-absorption, individualism and entitlement, leading to declining civic engagement and deteriorating governance. (Kupchan was obviously not swayed by Internet hype.) Because America's institutions of governance will decline, and America's people will not be able to sustain their commitment to maintaining the current world order, the American era will necessarily come to an end. I don't know if Kupchan is right about the digital revolution, but that's not what this review is about.

Kupchan, in my view, was a step away from developing a truly evolutionary theory. *Why* is history both progressive and cyclical. *Why* doesn't technological progress lead to political and social stability? To get an answer, one has to start with the beginning, the tens of thousands of years humans spent as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Our genes were designed by evolution to help us survive in the social and physical environment of hunting-gathering bands. As E. O. Wilson (2002) has written, "The human brain evidently evolved to commit itself emotionally only to a small piece of geography, a limited band of kinsmen, and two or three generations into the future." For individuals, there are a lot better places to live than a hunter-gatherer band. But those individuals have genetic predispositions which create disturbance in other environments. We aren't designed to commit to states and empires, even if nationalism and other ideologies can temporarily capture the emotions that were designed for another purpose.

The history of civilization makes best sense as a record of the trouble that began when humanity strayed from and transformed the physi-

cal and social environment that designed our genes. That history is the record of our search for a new equilibrium. Unfortunately, the search has so far not borne fruit. We make things "better" in a variety of ways, but the resulting invention still doesn't perfectly fit our genetic predispositions. We aren't content. "That isn't it," says Updike's Rabbit, to the priest who's trying to talk to him about God. "This isn't it," people say to jobs that pay thousands of dollars and let us work in soft, warm surroundings. We humans have an itch to change what we have. We destroy it and move on.

The hunter-gatherer band combined basic equality—enforced by the environment and by the absence of a system for storing wealth—with an absence of coercive governmental institutions. When society moves too far in one direction from a hunter-gatherer type environment—when, say, society becomes too competitive and unequal, or too tyrannical—there is a movement back in the other direction. Socialist institutions breed the desire for freedom. Capitalist institutions breed the desire for equality. That's why history is both progressive and cyclical.

It's a pity Kupchan didn't develop his evolutionary insights more systematically but he is to be congratulated for bringing evolutionary themes into the treatment of cultural history. Hopefully, others will soon follow in his footsteps.

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## References

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