

CURRENT HISTORY

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Is waterboarding torture? “It depends,” said Rudolph Giuliani, a Republican candidate for US president, “on who does it.”

Waterboarding was a favored technique of the Spanish inquisitors, the German Gestapo, and the Cambodian regime of Pol Pot. It involves binding a person, tipping him back, covering his mouth with a cloth, and repeatedly pouring water down his throat, forcing him to suffer the sensation of drowning. It is torture.

In 1947, the United States prosecuted a Japanese military officer for war crimes—he was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor—because he had carried out waterboarding on an American. The UN Convention Against Torture, to which the United States as a signatory is bound, states that “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.”

In short, even if Americans with authorization from the highest levels of government perform torture on terrorism suspects, it is still torture. In a legal system where supposedly no one, not even a president, transcends the law, wrongdoing is still wrongdoing, no matter “who does it.”

That a leading candidate for the US presidency seems oblivious to this truth would perhaps be more startling if the sitting president himself did not contend that torture committed by his agents is not torture. Administration officials betray no hint of irony when they refer approvingly to “enhanced interrogation,” a term (*“verschärfte vernehmung”*) coined by the Gestapo.

In fact, the issue of torture opens a window onto a broad and troubling trend in the world today: the continuing setbacks to global governance inflicted by the US administration’s apparent contempt for international norms.

Scholars have struggled to explain why norms—broadly accepted standards of behavior—change over time. The changes themselves are indisputable. Slavery, widespread for thousands of years, has almost disappeared. Universal agreement on the right to self-determination has supplanted colonialism. Warfare across national borders, formerly a standard instrument of statecraft, is rare today, and in any case prompts international condemnation. In most countries, public executions are passé.

Torture, as a behavior tolerated in civilized society, likewise seems on the decline, even if a country traumatized by terrorist attacks watches television shows that glorify it and, in 2004, reelected a president who authorizes it. Still, this particular variant of American exceptionalism—the suggestion that abusive treatment is acceptable if Americans perform it—matters, and not only because it undermines the nation’s sense of itself and its moral standing in the world. It also matters because the process of stigmatizing torture is part of a larger,

global evolution from an international system based on power alone toward one based on shared norms.

International norms, even if they are codified in treaties and promulgated by institutions, are less enforceable than a nation's laws, but they are no less significant for that. Some norms express affirmative values, like protecting the environment. Others establish taboos, like the injunction against using nuclear weapons first. Democracy itself amounts to a collection of norms about how to transfer power, hold governments accountable, protect minority rights, and so forth. Many states will give lip service to a norm, calling themselves democratic while conducting sham elections, for example. But it still means something when rulers feel they must pretend to be democratic. It means the liberal norm is spreading and, over time, will deepen its roots as more people adopt it, compare it to their reality, and push for adherence.

As we begin 2008, democratic norms according to opinion surveys enjoy near-universal appeal among people of every religion, ethnicity, and region of the world. And even though values that emphasize the sovereignty of states continue to prevail in the international system, the global balance is perceptibly shifting toward norms that defend the rights of individuals. More and more nations now frown, for example, on eavesdropping against citizens or imprisoning suspects without judicial review.

How Is the World Doing?

Current History's annual report card of global trends at the start of 2008.

C-

Politics

In 2007 the Communist Party (again) appointed China's leaders. Sham parliamentary elections affirmed Russia's conversion to authoritarian rule. And Pakistan fell into turmoil. It seems the global democracy wave that began in the 1970s has ebbed, though in many countries the messy work of democratic consolidation continues.

B-

Security

The "axis of evil" is looking less threatening these days. The US military surge has helped tamp down violence in Iraq. North Korea is allowing the dismantling of its nuclear reactor. Iran apparently put its nuclear weapon ambitions on hold years ago. However, while warfare is becoming more rare, horrific violence still erupts in places like Somalia and Sudan.

B+

Economy

The global economy in 2007 performed impressively, growing again by more than 5 percent. A credit crunch in America and Europe threatens to trigger a broader slowdown, but emerging markets, especially in Asia, are making the world less dependent on Western economies.

B-

Development

Rich countries have not increased aid significantly since 2004. And 40 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's inhabitants are still desperately poor. Nevertheless, transformative development continues to lift millions around the globe out of poverty, and many fewer children are dying from preventable diseases.

C

Resources

The world is now duly warned: Global warming is happening faster than many predicted. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has rung the alarm, calling on world leaders to take action in 2008 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The scientists did their job. Will the politicians do theirs?

It is a measure of the success of ideas and institutions built around the liberal triad of political rights, free markets, and collective security that they represent more than just items on a US foreign policy agenda, that they are public goods advocated by other states and nongovernmental organizations and embraced by people the world over. Even so, the United States historically has been a powerful force for helping to spread these norms and to incorporate them into an emerging rule-based order.

These days, of course, not so much. President George W. Bush since 9-11 has promoted the spread of democracy—rhetorically anyway, and foolishly with the invasion and occupation of Iraq. He is right that the best long-term antidote to terrorism is to draw more people and countries into the liberal order. Yet, not only has the “freedom agenda” been undercut by his incompetent pursuit of it; it has also been compromised by the administration’s simultaneous embrace of the notion that, because the United States today constitutes the world’s sole superpower, it stands to gain from an international system based more on power than on rules.

America in fact has always been ambivalent about international governance. The same country that championed the creation of the world’s key multilateral institutions (the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and so forth) has also sought to resist entangling itself in international obligations (the League of Nations, International Criminal Court, Kyoto Protocol, Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and so on). No US administration, however, has been more radically skeptical of global rules and norms than the one that has occupied the White House for the past seven years.

OPPORTUNITY COSTS

The world has suffered as a result. The damage is worse than it might appear because the administration’s sins of omission—what did not happen, yet might have—are even more grievous than its follies of unilateralism. The Bush White House seized a moment when the United States had emerged as an unprecedented and unrivaled global superpower, and it squandered that moment. It used power in the fashion of a bully, in numerous instances abrogating treaties, scorning diplomacy, sneering at the Geneva Conventions, dismissing the need to seek international legitimacy for its actions, and professing indifference to swelling anti-Americanism. Worse still, however, has been the administration’s failure to wield US influence in ways that could help lock states more tightly into networks of liberal rules and institutions.

Simple cost-benefit calculations would suggest, for example, that the United States would profit along with the rest of the world from a successful round of talks to liberalize global trading rules, even if that meant confronting America’s domestic farm lobby. It would be much less costly and more effective to bolster norms against nuclear proliferation and strengthen the international institutions that guard against it, than to threaten preemptive military action against every country that shows signs of nuclear ambitions. And it would be far easier to encourage China and other nations to reduce carbon emissions that contribute to global warming if the United States promoted—and agreed to subject itself to—an international treaty with binding obligations.

The principles involved are not complex. Persuasion works better than coercion, and it is easier to get others to comply voluntarily with norms that suit your interests if you do not try to exempt yourself from the norms. These principles, flowing from the Enlightenment’s appeal to universal values, have ever greater empirical substance in today’s globalized, economically interdependent world, in which states must increasingly rely on the actions of others to realize their goals.

At the dawn of the new year, a number of trends suggest the recent past has provided a learning experience. The United States has exhibited new interest in diplomacy, most prominently in its dealings with North Korea, but also in making a show of reviving Israeli-Palestinian talks. Transatlantic relations are on the mend. While security in Iraq has improved, the overall experience there has reminded America, again, of the limits of military power. The recent turmoil in Pakistan has underscored the long-term unreliability of autocrats as allies. And recognition appears to be growing that, to address global problems like climate change, there is no substitute for international cooperation.

To be sure, some observers continue to hype the threat posed by Islamists, or suggest that authoritarian China and Russia may present a stable alternative to the democratic developmental model—as if the advantages of the latter have not over time proved themselves. Others question the value of globalization because of its environmental effects—as if globalization did not also spread the norms, as well as the incomes and innovations, that facilitate environmental protection. Still others argue that China, as a rising power, must inevitably come into conflict with the United States—as if success in the global arena were a zero-sum game. Few policy debates today take into account the capacity of evolving norms to transform the international system, albeit gradually and with constant detours and disruptions.

The underlying pattern remains positive nonetheless. Norms associated with liberal governance, free trade, and international cooperation serve everyone's long-term interests, most especially a superpower's. America's stakes in a rule-based order create enormous incentives for Washington to return to the role it performed after World War II, when it helped extend acceptance of these norms in part by demonstrating its willingness to abide by them.

The United States is exceptional, after all, not because its citizens are morally superior but because its founders were politically shrewd. They understood that flawed humans can fall prey to the temptations of power, so they instituted a system of rules to keep power in check. This system helped make America the earth's most powerful nation. It is not too much to expect the US leadership to recognize that the country similarly benefits from international norms even when they limit national autonomy. At the very least, it is not too much to expect the next president to weigh the benefits of torture against the costs of abandoning opposition to barbarity everywhere. A.S.

POLITICS

Freedom stagnation

THE MOST CONSPICUOUS trend in the global political arena recently has been a series of affronts to democracy. In Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf's imposition of emergency rule in the fall set back hopes for political reform as well as efforts to combat Islamist radicals. (Musharraf added insult to injury by invoking "terrorism" and "judicial activists"—threats familiar to American ears—to justify his circumvention of the constitution.) China in October chose its leadership at the seventeenth Communist Party Congress without resort, of course, to popular elections. In Russia, parliamentary balloting only

reconfirmed President Vladimir Putin's establishment of an authoritarian state. In January 2007, Bangladesh offered a reminder, as Thailand had a few months earlier, that military takeovers have yet to pass entirely from the scene.

The democracy-monitoring group Freedom House, in its 2007 annual survey, reported that the percentage of the world's countries designated as "free" remains flat. The survey's authors worried aloud that "freedom stagnation" may have set in. There is no reason, however, to assume the trend is permanent.

Granted, obstacles to political progress at the start of 2008 loom large. The Iraq War, meant to serve as a demonstration project, has performed precisely that role, but not as Washington intended. Autocrats in the region, such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, point to continuing disorder in formally democratic Iraq to justify deferring reform in their own countries. Notwithstanding the success of the recent US military surge in tamping down violence, the American occupation and Shiite takeover of Iraq have empowered sectarian militias and emboldened Iran's theocrats, hardly good news for democracy.

Elsewhere in the world, in countries such as North Korea, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, repressive regimes remain resilient despite the suffering of their populations. A larger number of nations have adopted democratic trappings but their people still endure a lack of government transparency, weakness in the rule of law, a marginalized press and political opposition, and rampant corruption. Entrenched elites the world over have found ways to preserve power and perquisites despite the adoption of formally democratic institutions.

Meanwhile, China and Russia's economic growth has not seemed to suffer as a result of their authoritarian rule. And in a number of countries—China, Russia, Venezuela, Iran, and Zimbabwe among them—regimes have become more aggressive about cracking down on civil society and democracy promotion efforts.

All of this gives cause, certainly, to avoid taking democratization for granted. As Europe's tortuous path over centuries makes clear, progress toward liberal governance does not take place without deviations, delays, and conflict. And yet, look how far the world has come since the so-called third wave of democratization began in the mid-1970s. More than 60 nations have undergone democratic transitions over the past three decades. Today the Freedom House analysis deems 90 countries "free" in terms of civil liberties and political rights. These account for 47 percent of the global population. Another 58 nations qualify as "partly free," comprising 30 percent of the population. The "not free" label applies to 45 countries with 23 percent of the world's inhabitants, but half of them live in one country: China.

FRAGILE AUTHORITARIANS

China's authoritarian model is more fragile than it appears. The regime is coming under growing pressure not just to continue delivering economic

growth but also to address problematic byproducts of growth, including social inequality and environmental damage. Corruption in particular is hard to root out in the absence of democratic accountability. Especially as the Chinese economy develops beyond basic manufacturing, substandard governance and the repression of political discourse will not be sustainable vehicles for the prosperity with which the Communist Party has legitimated its rule.

As for Russia, its recent economic gains have depended on exhaustible oil and gas extraction. That country's outlook would look far more promising had the Kremlin not corruptly taken over the energy sector and crudely blocked development of an independent judiciary, civil society, political opposition, and news media. And Putin's apparent efforts to find a way to stay in power hardly brighten prospects for regime stability. Russia and China's continuing integration into a globalized economy, as well as their aspirations to assume respected leadership roles in the international community, are incompatible in the long run with their domestic denial of accountability and political rights.

Yes, the world appears to be experiencing a period of democratic stagnation. For many nations, however, this is a time of ongoing democratic consolidation. In Latin America, for example, for all the attention that Venezuela's Hugo Chávez draws to himself (and for all the oil money he hands out), few states have embraced his brand of authoritarian populism. In December, a constitutional referendum that might have allowed Chávez to remain president for life went down to stunning defeat. Indeed, Latin America has been host recently to numerous free and fair elections. The region's two most populous states, Brazil and Mexico, have used democratic governance to integrate their economies into international markets while taking steps to address social and economic disparities. Much of the political discontent in Latin America today expresses the kind of aspiration for better, fairer government that democratic institutions encourage.

Africa continues to be the scene of chronic dysfunction and stagnation. The continent is replete with democratic backsliding, state failure, and ethnic conflict. But a number of sub-Saharan nations, including Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are attempting to rebuild their states after emerging from years of conflict. Others, such as Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, and Ghana, have experienced discernible political improvement over the past 10 years. The rule of law in particular remains weak across much of the region. Still, it is

notable that among the 48 sub-Saharan states, Freedom House in its 2007 survey rated 11 “free” and 22 “partly free.” Compare that with the dearth of political freedoms in the 1970s, a time when military dictators ruled Nigeria and South Africans lived under apartheid.

President Bush’s freedom agenda notwithstanding, Washington has done little for the cause of democracy lately. Indeed, the administration’s mismanagement of foreign policy has prompted many in the United States and abroad to question the merits of democracy promotion, or at least to suggest it be put off until “conditions are right.” Autocrats everywhere cheer this notion, of course. But why would the apparent stalling of global democratization argue for abandoning or deferring reform efforts, rather than reorienting and redoubling them?

Experience suggests that the impetus for liberal reform in recalcitrant countries can rarely be imposed, but must arise from within, encouraged by the global spread and deepening of democratic

norms. Thus, disentangling US support for democratization from military intervention and threats of intervention would help. So would better coordination of democracy promotion efforts with America’s allies and the international community. It will not do, moreover, merely to urge others to embrace democratic principles such as checks and balances, transparency, accountability, and respect for individual rights. The United States must practice what it preaches.

Meanwhile, there is cause for optimism regarding the long-term prospects for political reform around the world. Democratization has built up considerable momentum over the past three decades. Most countries that have become democratic will have a hard time going back. And the holdouts ultimately will prove less successful, economically and otherwise, than states that have embraced liberal norms. It helps that the globalization of information will make evident to everyone the holdouts’ failings. A.S.

ECONOMY

Let the good times roll

FOR THOSE WHO appraise the global economy at the beginning of each new year, the question is getting to be an old one: How much longer can the good times last? Since 2003, global GDP has grown at historically high rates each year. Millions have been lifted from poverty each year. Yet trouble has always seemed just around the corner.

The dangers have been many. America’s current account deficit would send the dollar tanking. Surging demand in China would spur inflation there and require tighter monetary policy. Europe’s major economies would continue laboring under excessive, self-imposed regulatory burdens. Japan would never quite manage to struggle off the mat. Oil prices would skyrocket.

Arguably, everything that was supposed to trigger a global slowdown over the past few years has already come to pass—yet no significant slowing has occurred (or at any rate shown itself yet). Could 2008 be the year when the gloomy predictions finally come true?

Prognosticators are nearly unanimous in forecasting slowed growth for the year ahead—if only modest slowing. The IMF projects global GDP growth of 4.8 percent for 2008. This is quite a nice number by historical standards, but it is four-tenths

of a point lower than projected 2007 growth, and the risks are to the downside. A number of these risks are tied, in one way or another, to a crisis in US financial markets.

The subprime crisis, as it is known, began when US homeowners started defaulting on dodgy mortgages. The fallout from this would have been largely limited to the homeowners and their issuing banks—except that the mortgages had been packaged and repackaged as asset-backed securities, multiplying the risk across financial institutions. Suddenly, the Federal Reserve Bank was forced to inject liquidity into the banking system and loosen monetary policy. A number of premier financial institutions have had to admit that vast quantities of their so-called assets are a pile of junk.

In America, the question is whether the subprime crisis will trigger a mere slowdown or a full-blown recession. Abroad, the question is whether the risks proceeding from US economic disruptions are as scary today as they would have been in the past. Yes, manufacturers worldwide could get pinched if American consumers tighten their wallets. Yes, spooked investors may continue shying away from US investments, deepening the dollar’s

decline and further weakening America's import capabilities. And yes, international financial systems may turn out to be exposed to the subprime crisis in ways that are not yet clear.

But so far, economies outside the United States have been affected only lightly. This probably indicates improved macroeconomic policies around the world. Mostly it indicates that emerging markets are now the world's largest engines of growth.

In 2007, China accounted for more than one-third of world economic growth (calculated in terms of purchasing power parity). Taken together, China, India, and Russia accounted for more than one-half. And though these three countries are all projected to experience slowing growth in 2008, they will still register respective GDP growth rates, if IMF predictions hold, of 10 percent, 8.4 percent, and 6.5 percent. Contrast this with America's 1.9 percent and Japan's 1.7 percent. Indeed, compare the latter two countries' expected rates of growth to the outlook for sub-Saharan Africa, a long-suffering region that expects to see 2008 GDP growth of 6.5 percent (making it the world's only region in which 2008 growth is projected to exceed 2007 levels).

So growth in emerging markets is making the world less dependent on the success of a few first world economies. But, as always, dangers to the global economy lurk. One hazard is the inflationary pressure exerted by increased global demand

for oil and food. A diverse group of nations, from the fastest developing to the very poorest, is feeling the squeeze of higher prices. Among major economies, it is China where inflation is drawing the most attention—authorities there have raised interest rates to keep inflation in check even as more developed economies have cut rates to keep business humming. Additional dangers are that credit and liquidity conditions, which are expected to return to normal as the subprime crisis tapers off, might not return to normal so fast, and that global payment imbalances could unwind in a disorderly fashion.

These are year-to-year issues. Eventually they will pass. Meanwhile, the underlying processes of global economic growth remain strong. As East Asia—and, increasingly, South Asia—have shown, poor countries can lift their inhabitants out of poverty with awesome speed if they make the right strides in infrastructure, education, governance, market liberalization, and a few other areas.

In most contexts it is depressing to contemplate how much of the world's population remains desperately poor. According to the World Bank, 2.5 billion people still live on \$2 per day or less. At the same time, every impoverished nation represents an opportunity for millions more to be shown escape routes from extreme poverty. Such nations are growing scarcer as the years roll by. L.C.

SECURITY

Threats and counterthreats

WHEN A RESPONSIBLE politician feels compelled by events to threaten a foreign country with military action, his threats are unlikely to include the inflammatory word "war." The responsible politician tends toward more ambiguous, less aggressive language, and traffics in phrases like "serious consequences." But when US Vice President Dick Cheney threatened Iran in October with "serious consequences" if it did not stop enriching uranium, everything seemed a little upside down. Cheney, instead of ratcheting his rhetoric down to make his presumed belligerence more opaque, was ratcheting his rhetoric up to compensate for US reluctance to strike the Islamic Republic militarily. At least, that is how it seemed.

Cheney came out looking foolish because America's bumbling foreign policy of the past seven years has left the United States with few

good options for containing Iran. The lion's share of the bumbling, of course, has occurred to Iran's west, in Iraq, where we have witnessed the unfolding of elective disaster. Yet, perversely, one now perceives in Iraq's very cataclysm certain signs of hope: Iraqis for the time being seem exhausted from killing each other, and out of the wreckage a grotesque security mechanism is developing. The biggest driver of this increased security is the de facto segregation of Sunnis and Shiites, an arrangement the two groups have arrived at through brutal, reciprocal campaigns of ethnic cleansing. It is a deplorable reality, but it is also reducing civilian deaths at the moment, and it is better than what preceded it.

The US invasion of Iraq was intended in part to intimidate Iran, but instead Iran has gained influence within Iraq. One may ask with only a trace of

obtuseness if this development really matters. After all, Iran is an anti-Western and somewhat belligerent country—but so was Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Many Iranians retain friendly feelings for America and desire political freedom in their own country. There are firm limits in any event to the potential of Shiite Iranian influence in the mostly Sunni Arab Middle East.

Even Iran's nuclear ambitions seem less worrisome than they did until recently, as a December report by America's 16 spy agencies concluded that Iran had frozen its nuclear weapons program in 2003 (though the country's uranium enrichment evidently continues apace). In any case, a nuclear Iran would seem no likelier than other nuclear-armed states to ensure its own destruction by actually using atomic weapons.

A more frightening nuclear scenario is developing in Pakistan. Here, the world contends with a nuclear nation that has a nuclear enemy nearby. A nation with a poor record of safeguarding its nuclear technology. A nation whose rickety system of government looks forever in danger of collapse, and whose contestants for power include individuals far nastier than President Musharraf. A nation, moreover, that is home to Al Qaeda and terrorist training camps. If somehow out of Pakistan's turmoil there emerges real progress toward legitimate government and a credible security situation, all is well. If not, it is ludicrous to prioritize dangers emanating from Tehran over those originating in Islamabad.

BEYOND THE MIDDLE EAST

In East Asia, two security issues stand out: potential long-term competition between China and the United States for supremacy in the Pacific, and the ever-worrisome Korean peninsula. In the first instance, cool calculations of self-interest prevail. Although China clearly aims to be boss of the Western Pacific in the long run, Beijing understands that military equality with America is decades away. In the second instance—the Korean peninsula—perhaps cool calculations of self-interest prevail as well.

Kim Jong Il, demonstrably odd, may have exaggerated his oddness for effect, reckoning that he maximizes his power and safety by appearing to be

a crazy person in a bad tracksuit who might nuke you for no reason. Now, having gotten some of what he wanted from his posturing, he is allowing foreigners to disable his nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. The prospect of nuclear apocalypse in Seoul begins to seem more distant—if indeed, to begin with, it was anything but fantastic.

Such concerns aside, the dominant long-term trend in global security is still a continuing reduction in warfare. Despite the conflicts in the Middle East and the tensions in East Asia, huge tracts of the earth now seem exempt from major conflict. Europe. North America. Latin America and Southeast Asia, give or take a minor insurgency. East Asia and the former Soviet republics for the time being. This leaves us with perennial conflict zones in the Middle East, where violence threatens because government prevails too much, and in sub-Saharan Africa, where violence prevails because government does not. Today's Somalia is a gruesome case in point—there, a failed state, an occupying power, and a brutal insurgency exact punishment on an already tormented people.

Yet one can dream that even such regions are on a long, slow arc toward peace and stability.

After all, it was only decades ago that Europe was ablaze in the vilest war humanity has known. Today, Europe's disagreements are resolved in Brussels via mind-numbing technocratic dialogue.

The United States is now embarking on its marathon process of choosing a president. Because the current occupant of the White House has made such a wreck of his job, this election will mean more than most. But no matter who next resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the United States remains indispensable in the global security regime. And though US power is generally perceived as weakened just now, the problems are not structural. What is needed is better policy.

American power is bound to be challenged in the coming decades. But if the challengers turn out to incorporate in their calculations an appreciation for the self-interested liberalism that the United States has at critical times exhibited in its six decades of global preeminence, then the search for security may one day be perceived as not just a naked scramble for power, but as an exercise in global progress.

L.C.

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DEVELOPMENT

Halfway there?

IN 2000, a group of 192 countries established the Millennium Development Goals—an ambitious set of targets aimed at improving, by 2015, the lives of the world's poorest people. With roughly half the time allotted now having expired, what has the progress been? According to a recently released UN report, the results are “uneven.”

Where the news is good, it is stunning. One standout statistic is this: Between 1990 and 2004, “the proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell from nearly a third to less than one-fifth.” This represents an improvement in material well-being unequalled in human history. The most dramatic poverty-reduction successes have come in Asia. But even in sub-Saharan Africa, the poverty rate has declined by six percentage points over the past seven years. And the good news extends beyond poverty reduction. Globally, fewer children are dying, more of them are attending elementary school, and women are participating more in political processes. The struggle against diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and measles is yielding impressive results—for example, measles deaths fell by more than 60 percent between 2000 and 2005.

Where the news is bad, it is vile. Item one: In South Asia, 46 percent of children under five years old are underweight. Item two: In sub-Saharan Africa, 166 out of every 1,000 babies die before the age of five. Item three: Also in sub-Saharan Africa, over 40 percent of people continue to live in extreme poverty. Grim information abounds on sanitation, AIDS deaths, women's health during pregnancy and childbirth, and environmental issues like climate change and deforestation. Each of these problems is intertwined in some way with a shortage of decently paying work for residents of the world's poorest countries.

The 2007 *Millennium Development Goals Report* asserts that reaching the objectives is still achievable, but it excoriates donor countries for failing to live up to their existing financial commitments. “The lack of any significant increase in official development assistance since 2004,” the report says, “makes it impossible, even for well-governed countries,” to meet the goals. Now, with the possibility of recession emerging in the United States and perhaps beyond, one worries that wealthy countries will grow even more miserly with development funds.

Rich countries' shortcomings do not end with broken aid promises. They also include wrong-headed agricultural policies that subsidize wealthy farmers and deprive the world's poor farmers of markets for their crops. Farm-policy reform does not seem in the offing, either, as the world continues to make little progress in international trade talks.

Rich countries, when taken to task for their development failures, may object that poor nations deserve some blame as well. They certainly do—or at least their governments do. From pervasive corruption in Haiti to disastrous authoritarianism in Myanmar to a kleptocratic attitude toward natural resources in a host of countries, governance problems hinder development and contribute directly to human misery. But at the same time, rich countries should remember that their own prosperity is not solely the product of hard work and good governance. Rich countries happen not to suffer from certain systemic misfortunes that retard progress in the world's poorest regions. For instance, as long as farmers in the Sahel are dependent solely on rainfall for the success of their crops, they stand forever on the edge of starvation. No first world farmer is so vulnerable. And how many Americans or Germans have ever lost a day's work to malaria?

THE HARD CASES

But even if rich-country aid flowed more freely to the poor world, and even if all kleptocrats were swept from office and replaced with good-government technocrats, major challenges would remain. Even where economic development is a rampant success, as in China, hundreds of millions remain shut out. Across the world many will continue to be denied opportunities to enjoy the fruits of development whenever economic liberalization is not complemented by the political liberalization that allows citizens to defend their rights.

We expect a lot of development. Very often, it does what we ask of it. But even after decades of well-intentioned international experiments, we are still learning what sparks development, what hinders it, and how to maximize it. Though development has now emerged as one of history's great transformative processes, we must watch over it with a wary eye. We must ensure that it delivers what we know it can. And we must not depend on it for what it cannot deliver.

L.C.

RESOURCES

A change of climate

DID THE PAST YEAR mark a tipping point on global warming? It may have in terms of international awareness. The UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported in 2007 that the evidence is “unequivocal,” and that most global warming is “very likely” the result of heat-trapping gases produced by human activity. Indeed, carbon emission levels in China and elsewhere are currently meeting or exceeding scientists’ worst-case scenarios. In December, representatives from around the world met in Bali to consider future efforts to stabilize the warming trend.

Yet heightened awareness, while a necessary condition for action, is not sufficient. Achieving consensus on a treaty with serious, enforceable limits on emissions will require adroit leadership and diplomacy, guided by an appropriate sense of urgency. Among the thorny realities in the way: The biggest source of carbon emissions is the burning of fossil fuels, the engine that drives the global economy; and the biggest contributors to the problem are generally not the countries most vulnerable to its harmful effects.

Rich countries, in particular the United States, need to provide leadership for effective international action. This has been lacking so far. Europe has made progress in modeling an emissions-permit trading system. But, according to scientists, if the world is to avoid the worst effects of global warming, developed nations will need to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 60 percent to 80 percent by 2050. Most developed countries have *increased* their emissions over the past decade. Meanwhile, the Bush administration opposes a carbon tax, an economically efficient way to reduce emissions and encourage development of alternative fuels. For controlling emissions internationally, Washington has proposed voluntary “aspirational” goals.

Leadership is required, as well, to organize the equivalent of a Marshall plan for technology transfer and financing to assist developing nations in making the transition to low-carbon energy sources. In the absence of such leadership, greater efforts will be needed to help the most vulnerable and poorest countries cope with water shortages, storm damage, increased conflicts over resources, massive migrations, and other likely effects of climate change.

Further complicating the most serious environmental challenge humanity has faced is the simul-

taneous need to come to grips with planet-wide degradation of natural resources and ecosystems resulting from the pressures of growth and development. Many nations have made progress over the past 30 years in certain areas—in reducing air and water pollution, for instance, and addressing ozone loss in the atmosphere. Yet unsustainable development increasingly threatens a variety of natural resources, including agriculture, fisheries, and water supplies.

In October 2007, the UN Environment Program tried to ring alarms with a report, “Global Environment Outlook 4,” that received little attention. The world, it noted, has endured five mass extinctions of plant and animal life in its history; the sixth is happening now as a result of land-use changes, pollution, overexploitation of resources, habitat loss, and the spread of invasive alien species. And global warming is likely aggravating the trend. Without intensified conservation efforts and smarter management of resources, the loss of biodiversity will continue to accelerate.

Desertification, quickened by climate change, is a particular threat in Africa, where food production per capita has gone down 12 percent in 25 years. In the Asia-Pacific region, urban air pollution, stress on water supplies, degraded ecosystems, and a proliferation of hazardous waste all pose challenges. West Asia’s most pressing problems include rapid urban growth, fresh water stresses, and degradation of land, coasts, and marine ecosystems. In Europe, environmental troubles mainly stem from overcrowding and overconsumption. Growing water scarcity threatens the Middle East.

As the UN report noted, Latin America has made impressive progress recently in setting aside conservation areas, and deforestation of the Amazon has slowed. The region is still stressed, however, by urbanization and threats to biodiversity. In North America, suburban sprawl and wasteful energy use are continuing problems; gas-guzzling vehicles and rising numbers of cars and miles driven have offset recent gains in energy efficiency.

In the past, nations have invested in environmental protection as incomes have grown with economic development. But climate change and the loss of biodiversity threaten to produce irreversible effects for which growing incomes cannot compensate. This is why the need for action is urgent. A.S.