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FUTURE TENSE: OUR WORLD IN TEN

— Darrell Bricker and Robin Shepherd

On October 2, 2018, Saudi dissident and political intellectual Jamal Kashoggi went, with his wife to be, to his country's consulate in Istanbul. She waited outside while he went in to get some routine documents for their impending marriage. That was the last she ever saw of him. Turkish police said that Kashoggi, a critic of Saudi Arabia's "reformist" Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (or MBS as he is affectionately known), was tortured to death in the consulate, and then dismembered with a bone saw. The gruesome murder was apparently overseen by a 15-member death squad specially flown to Turkey by the Saudi authorities.

Against a wider backdrop of almost routine assassinations of Vladimir Putin's opponents abroad, Iran's ongoing policy of murdering dissidents anywhere they please, the killing of defectors and exiles by North Korea, such as the assassination in Malaysia last of year of Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam, and a litany of other murders on foreign soil by dictatorships around the world, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres ruefully mused that there was now a danger of this turning into the "new normal".

Is there? Are we spiraling into barbarism? Is this really the world we will hand down to our children?

Yes and no. When we consider the big picture, it really isn't all bad news. On issues that involve personal liberty, our grandparents would be shocked by how far humanity has come. This doesn't mean that there aren't countries where the story is less positive. But, when we pull back and look at developments over several decades, the overall trend is in the direction of more, rather than less, freedom. And, for most of the world's

measures of misery, including child mortality, crippling poverty, and diseases that once cut down entire populations, there has also been significant improvement. Don't believe us? Back in 1950, the average person in China could expect to live to the age of 40. Today, it is 80: a doubling of the human life span in less than a century. That's progress.

So, why are people so pessimistic? Over 80 percent of those surveyed by Ipsos for Halifax International Security Forum tell us the world is becoming a more dangerous place. Yes, we're worried about newer threats to public safety including terrorism and cyber-attacks. But, we also think there's potential for a great superpower conflict over the next 25 years on the scale of the First and Second World Wars. In our survey of public opinion in 26 countries, almost two thirds of respondents expected such a conflagration, hardly a vote of confidence in the people who run the world today.

Public opinion is one of the most powerful forces we have to contend with. But it also covers a vast matrix of different issues and concerns. When we present people with hard facts about social improvement they are happy to agree that not everything in the world is bad. When we ask more amorphous questions about the future of world peace or their personal prospects in a decade's time, they are thrown back on their gut feelings about trust in their leaders. That is where the pessimism kicks in. Memories of Western governments' claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction or the mismanagement which led to the Great Recession are deeply embedded in the public consciousness. And that goes some way to explaining why there is such a disconnect between elites and the public.

The reality is that the state of the world, and the record of those who run it, is a mixed picture. Into this mixed picture steps the demagogue, the rabble rouser, the populist. Demagogues, of course, are not interested in nuances. They thrive in a world of unbalanced anxiety by validating what worries the public, and sidelining matters that could inspire confidence. They specialize in communicating simple answers to complex problems, all too often leading to scapegoating. What's wrong in my country today? It's migrants who are changing my culture; it's corrupt elites who have rigged the economy to their advantage; it's globalists who have created a world that works for them, but not for us.

The rise of populism and the concomitant collapse of public trust is one of the biggest challenges we now face, and it's not just going away. How do we find that so far elusive point of balance between addressing legitimate public concerns on the one hand and not giving in to unwarranted narratives of doom and gloom on the other?

We propose a three-point strategy. First, let's continue to ask people what they think. It is futile

to despair over the disconnect between elites and the public if we are ignorant about public concerns. Second, neither blame the public for their concerns, nor simply validate them without an honest assessment of whether they are reasonable. Just because demagogues are frightened of nuances, that doesn't mean we should be. Third, regain the respect of the public by being open about our shortcomings and the nature of the challenges we face.

The challenges of the next decade and beyond are of course immense. We will be facing a global population that is increasingly infertile, rapidly aging, and mostly living in cities. This older, urbanized population will be overwhelmed by an ever-expanding firehose of information.

In the end, it all comes back to trust. Put simply, if what we're talking about won't help to rebuild that trust, why are we talking about it?

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