

Greeting the Fall of the Empire: a Message of Peace

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
03 January 2011

Self-editor's note: I have been lagging on offering criticism of two popular revolutionary authors who have included me their books. I finally did it, within a more important context. - JL

Please join me in greeting the fall of the U.S. Empire, a healthy way to begin this new year. It is a positive sentiment among some thoughtful Americans. Their ungiddy feeling flows from observation of world developments and the state of the U.S. political system and economy. The timetable is fuzzy, but trends are clear. It's not pretty, but there is a thin silver lining.

These days are for many of us the winter of our discontent. Weird and dangerous weather on the rise, persistent fossil-fuel dominance, never-ending wars, unraveling of the social fabric, looming shortages of food and water, and lack of money for basic needs aren't just some unpatriotic ravings of those who want to put America down. Rather, the growing uncertainty of our survival, individually and for our families, has everyone's skull in a vice tightened by unseen or unknown hands. Those hands are actually of our own making: our dominant culture has been building up to a colossal, spectacular, global failure.

If the Empire's collapse and cultural failure sound extremely negative, you can cling to your privilege in a world "burning in its greed" (the Moody Blues, Question), or go back to hoping for a lucrative job. Or you might keep up the magical thinking that says things will work out without major pain. But even a hard realist or pessimist who sees the Empire now starting to fall ought to smile, for as Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang in Carry On, "Rejoice, rejoice, we have no choice. But to carry on." This can translate to "if you can't stop the fall, roll with it. Standing like a wall won't be wise."

As to the most visible part of the Empire: no one can tell how much more U.S./NATO military effort will bring about whatever result in Afghanistan or Iraq. Or in Pakistan, or wherever the 1,000 or so U.S. military bases sit on sovereign countries' soil. But the massive cost in taxpayer dollars, when the federal budget has gone way into the red with no sign of recovery back into the black, cannot be sustained -- even if the trillions spent on war and waste could be recalled. It is sad that there is less concern in the U.S. than anywhere over the ongoing loss in human life, in terms of soldiers on all sides and the citizens of invaded nations. Yet, the human and environmental cost of optional wars mounts astronomically and will be paid somehow.

Regardless of military victories or failures, or how blatantly corrupt the mercenary/contractor factor is, the overall inefficiency of our government and U.S. society cannot last. The breakdown of both trust and function in the financial sphere as well as in community cohesion-- as people work harder and harder (if they can) but cannot get ahead, mostly unable to help one another -- is becoming apparent to the average citizen. Just a few years ago, if a visionary brought up issues such as peak oil and climate chaos, the usual reaction from a mainstream person was incredulity or "What, me worry?" This is changing quickly, with a consensus growing that general weirdness, stress and uncertainty relating to our dysfunctional System are on the rise. Moreover, there is no let up in sight. Collapse seems nigh.

Lest you believe this is the only message of this essay, keep reading.

The corporate media and the politicians have to keep hammering on the idea of the economy's returning to infinite growth. But they don't address the fact that peak oil has come, and the substitutes for petroleum cannot do much more than assure prolonged electrical energy. Peak oil is a liquid-fuels/materials crisis.

Given that the supply of cheap, abundant oil is much depleted for sustaining a massive population of hapless consumers, and given there is no comprehensive, scalable technofix, one can safely predict the end of the U.S.A. as we know it. But even without fully understanding the oil industry, many people from many walks of life are picking up on the utter failure of the Obama Hope Movement to deliver -- ever. He is increasingly seen as just another puppet. This disillusionment would not be dispositive except that foreclosures are on the rise, the commercial real estate bubble will pop, and employment is not going up -- well, it's going up if you're in a lower-wage outsource nation for U.S. corporations that care nothing about the welfare of the U.S. worker.

By now you might be squirming with some outrage over such a dismal analysis and the apparent lack of any alternative. Ah, but there is an alternative. The future belongs to the simple-living closer-to-the-land folk who can utilize what is known as Appropriate Tech. Above all, they know they must work as a close community. This is the only way they will survive. If this new scene is inevitable, how can we speed it along?

Living the future now means ditching the car or sharing one vehicle with others, not buying anywhere near the amount gasoline or diesel we've been guzzling, and making sure one's trade and dollars go only to local people. If The System that churns along for now so inefficiently, while it is less and less able to provide for us, and is doomed, then should its collapse be hastened? I hasten to say "Yes" only if it is carried out consciously and in a planned, compassionate fashion. Chaos is not the goal, nor a means. Yet, recognizing that the global corporate economy will rapidly give way to local, bioregional economies -- linked across oceans and up and down rivers by a quickly assembled sailing fleet for trade and passenger service -- means walking away from The System as it crashes down around us. It's not pretty, but inevitable.

Revolutionaries who don't quite get it

Some who do not understand the peak-oil basis of collapse, believing oil extraction will last as long in its dwindling phase as it took to peak, are trapped in the politics and economic theories of yesterday. They see the power elite continuing to hold sway indefinitely. They see coal maximized until the planet is completely fried, although they don't take into account that coal cannot substitute for liquid fuels that have built the current petroleum-based infrastructure. So, these confused and despairing onlookers may place faith in a relic of 18th, 19th and 20th century social dynamics: class revolution. Or, they may believe in a social justice movement that may peacefully turn out the aggressors and the corrupt (perhaps via a "REAL Obama"?), redistributing the pie of consumption.

Two well known opponents of the present System are Ted Rall and Derrick Jensen. They seem to have little in common, but they share impatience, passion and radical rhetoric that have a significant following. I don't believe either writer will get far with their message, even if their followers grow in number. This is because their rage and desire for deep change are not sufficiently grounded in reality.

Rall, like Jensen, warns against positive thinking based on lifestyle change and ecotopian dreams. His cartoons are legendary, and in 2001 he helpfully led the way for anti-war activists' grasping the petroleum-related basis for the war on Afghanistan. The Culture Change magazine Late Fall 2001 issue covered his findings. But his latest book, *Anti-American Manifesto*, is disturbing aside from its questionable title. In the first chapter he sets me up as a straw man representing naive ecotopians and the peak-oil crowd:

"Deep-green types fantasize about a collapse scenario that will save the world without anyone having to lift a finger. They imagine an involuntarily deindustrializing economy that allows the earth to heal while people gather to form small clans and low-impact villages based on ideals of equality. Here is a quote from Jan Lundberg, a deep-green proponent of 'peak oil' theory: 'New social norms and tribal law will help break from the past and possibly outlaw incipient reversion to the failed system of exploitation of people and nature. In any case, the 'new' model of sharing and cooperation will outdo in productivity any vestiges of the old models of selfishness and trying to insulate oneself or one's family from the surrounding changed world.'"

I stand by what I said in that 2005 essay ("End-time for USA upon oil collapse", link below), but Rall took me out of context when he does not include my views on resistance, resiliency, oil, and ushering in the future. Anti-American Manifesto was excerpted generously in the popular website Altnernet on Nov. 10, 2010. Their title of the review was wisely not the title of the book, but rather "As the Country Falls Apart, It's Time for Our Revolution." I would echo Jethro Tull when they pointed out in their 1969 song, Living In The Past, "Now there's revolution, but they don't know what they're fighting." Rall, Jensen and others seem to forget who in U.S society is so well armed and organized -- militarized police and the military -- but just as blindly, these would-be revolutionaries don't quite realize who or what the enemy is. As Matt Simmons told a Pentagon audience in 2006, "Maybe the enemy is us."

Derrick Jensen was primarily known in the late 1990s and early 2000s for impassioned prose in defense of nature and for appreciating the rights of species (including people) to have viable habitats. His early books inspired tree-sitters in ancient redwoods to redouble their efforts. When I heard him speak in 2000 at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California -- in what some call Ecotopia -- he opened his talk with "When I get up in the morning I wonder if I should go blow up a dam." He said it with a smile, to get across a point that the ecosystem's time is running out. Even Bruce Babbitt was advocating the removal of dams. Jensen was then primarily a journalist, interviewing thinkers such as Thomas Berry and even me for The Sun magazine.

By 2006 he had changed into an advocate for violence against humans. He was still eloquent regarding the ecological crisis. But in speeches he also was pointing young anarchists in the direction of combating the police on the streets, since the police would seem to represent the big polluting interests' hold on society. In 2007 I saw that his t-shirts for sale on his website depicted images of shooting bad guys. (Jensen's webmaster responded to this article and said the images were never there.) I asked to sit down with him to discuss these issues but he wasn't interested.

Jensen says there is a militant Earth defense movement that anyone -- anyone who cares about species extinction -- should join. When I disagreed in a listserv exchange, where I called violence against human an infantile strategy, his response was to say if he knew I was going to attack his work he would not have put me in his books.

He does not seem to realize that not only is a militant Earth protection movement minuscule if it exists at all, and would be rejected or unsupported by the population at large when violent means would be employed; Jensen also seems to discount completely the potential for a Gandhian approach to transforming society to deal with lethal threats common to us all. He also ridicules lifestyle change as a strategy to save the planet, citing false analogies such as the French Resistance hypothetically having to fight Nazis on bicycles only instead of with cars too. Our "taking shorter showers," he says, will not save the world. What he doesn't see is that if lifestyle change were to spread quickly (voluntarily or involuntarily), and it resulted in few enough new cars purchased, the dominant economic and political system would fall quickly, more or less peacefully if done proactively. As with Ted Rall, Jensen's including me in his books made me dismayed. Why would I want to be known for being cited prominently in any book called an anti-American manifesto -- a bit divisive and vague, right? And more objectionable is an author's promoting violence against humans with my name used even indirectly, when violence against people or animals is the opposite of my message.

For intelligent writers to take increasingly extreme positions (mixed with valid points) that Rall, Jensen and others have, shows that we are in an era of rising desperation, confusion and possible mass violence. I don't believe that social movements, militant or not, can compete with a collapsing economy or with nature "batting last." So we need to be realistic about what's coming down and how the fundamental, wrenching transformation or destruction will come about. At the same time, resisting The System is entirely appropriate: people need to stand up for their rights and for healthy nature, in part because taking action outside the influence of corporate and state propaganda is all too rare. Plus, the healthy, alternative social-relations and structures that have been put into place (or that can be created soon) on a small scale here and there will become hugely useful and valuable as collapse sets in. The "bad guy," we'll see, will have to be a part of the local-economies new paradigm. It's an unpleasant prospect to think of population size crashing down to whatever our diminished ecological carrying capacity is. But when it shakes out there will be more land available, empty buildings, and sudden urgency to cooperate with our neighbors for food production, clean water, and rebuilding society with a culture that can sustain life.

A posting to the SF Bay Oil listserv on January 2, 2011 alleged that the Rockefeller Foundation was a big player in a

conspiracy to control world agriculture and do away with the small farmer in the U.S. Comparison was made with Stalin's policies. What is missed in "pointing the finger at the bad guy" is that today's System breeds individuals and behaviors that naturally flourish in the increasingly manipulated, manufactured environment. We have almost 7 billion people today, half of them off the land completely. My response on the listserve was,

A slave (-equivalent) society is [apparently] more essential the larger the population is. And the larger the population is -- no matter how well provided-for it is or how free to vote for whomever -- the less ability there is for the average person to live off the land (ideally not as a serf or worker but a natural being) and be truly free.

There doesn't have to be an insidious, conscious plot by foundations and bankers to stamp out small farmers; the market system does it: as the world has found out, U.S. foreign policy has much to do with militarily forcing countries to be safe for democracy -- and corporate interests! Phil Ochs sang of it in a song released exactly 45 years ago, Cops of the World.

Cash-crops maximized to pay off national debt for "development" and to create jobs to "eliminate poverty" are generally a scam that hurts us all, including the entire ecosystem. And yes, the U.S. is well on the way to becoming a Third World nation in most of its sectors due in part to accelerated offshore hiring and outsourcing.

Another approach to fighting inequality, oppression and violence is from the impeccably logical Robert Jensen, journalism professor and author. He is a moralist and activist who calls upon us to do our best for our community. What set him off for his latest commentary January 2 was a column titled "Yes, the Greatest Country Ever," by Rich Lowry of the National Review.

Robert Jensen's come-back was "'Greatest nation' rhetoric roars back". In it he points us to his 2004 book Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity that offers common-sense responses for us today as we get ready for a more right-wing Congress. In the book he deconstructs "the greatest nation" rhetoric and challenges the concept of patriotism. These are difficult subjects, but it helps that whoever tackles them knows, as Jensen happens to know, that collapse is upon us. In a 2010 essay he made clear that he feels collapse's thoroughly depressing aspect must be openly discussed. Once we do that and check out better lifestyles in community, there might be something to raise our glasses to: peace, and minimal violence and confusion.

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References and further reading:

Matt Simmons's comments to a mostly Pentagon audience, reported in the Culture Change article dated June 24, 2006: The maturation of Matt Simmons, energy-industry investment banker

As the Country Falls Apart, It's Time for Our Revolution: A call to arms from Ted Rall's new book, "Anti-American Manifesto." alternet.org (Six webpages)

End-time for USA upon oil collapse, Culture Change Letter #100, by Jan Lundberg, 18 June 2005

Dissolve the U.S.: an Option for Proactive Change before Collapse, by Jan Lundberg, 18 December 2008

Rockefeller Foundation and world agriculture (bibliotecapleyades.net -- search page for 'farmers' to find section)

Robert Jensen, whose essays have been on Culture Change:

Citizens of the Empire, City Lights Books, two chapters from that book:
CoEGreatest.pdf and CoEGreatest.pdf.

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