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Math Across Cultures

28 February 2011

Ominous Failure

Currently, it seems societies move along without taking the necessary heed to the dangerous problems that face our world and could lead to collapse. After all, modern day societies benefit from globalization, modern medicine, technology, and a greater knowledge of past cultures (Diamond, pg. 8). However, as Jared Diamond points out, current cultures are not as invincible as one would think and global decline may be looming in the future. Diamond wrote *Collapse* to provide a learning tool that links the problems that past societies once faced with the problems societies are facing today. Diamond states that he remains cautiously optimistic about our chances of overcoming a future collapse if we use this historical learning tool. Yet, I believe collapse is in our future and Diamond’s hopefulness in preventing a collapse is impractical and places too much on the shoulders of human beings. In reality, the current societal psychological and governmental makeup is not capable of dealing with the foreboding signs of collapse and consequently society is headed in the direction of failure.

We are a culture that tends to procrastinate and prioritize issues at the expense of forgetting other often important problems. For most people, if there is an assignment due at a later date it will probably not be attended to until the week before the due date. Moreover, an assignment that is worth thirty percent of the final grade will receive more time and effort than an assignment that is worth ten percent of the final grade. Our government works in the same kind of ways. Serious issues of climate change that may lead to collapse become placed on the back burner because its serious effects will not manifest itself for another twenty years. Also, our society is facing many serious issues in the Middle East and Wall Street making environmental and climate change problems smaller concerns for our government. Thus, Diamond’s idea that we can learn from previous cultures’ problems that parallel our own is unreasonable. Our current government would never investigate the different aspects that may prevent a collapse because it is neither a priority nor a current concern. Our governmental is one that postpones issues in which a problem will not be faced until it is considered important and current.

An example of our government’s delay in dealing correctly certain issues because of an apparent lack of importance is illustrated in Kennedy’s dealings with Cuba. Diamond ironically uses this example as a way to defend society’s ability to protect itself from collapse. Because of the United States pledge to defend against tyrants, our government made a poorly planned invasion of Cuba. Anti-Castro Cuban exiles were brought together by the CIA to form an insurgency and overthrow Castro. The plan miserably failed and when looked back upon is considered an embarrassment to U.S. foreign policy. The Cuban Missile Crisis that followed received a much different treatment than the previous Bay of Pigs fiasco. Kennedy sought productive decision-making tactics and opened discussions in order to mend the issue and fix the crisis. Though Kennedy’s dilemma ended happily, the way in which Kennedy went about making his policies exemplifies the scrambling that our government often makes in trying to fix issues that were delayed upon because the issue was once considered of little importance. Kennedy did not focus all his efforts on solving the issue with Cuba until the situation reached a point that was considered dangerous. People remember Kennedy for resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, but many forget to realize that the whole situation may have been lessened if proper decision making was made from the beginning. Similarly, our current environmental and climate change problems are not overly serious and thus our policies in solving them are not serious as well. Though our policies are not having a negative effect like Kennedy’s did, the problems with the environment and climate will soon reach a point that will become dangerous and threatening. People will wonder why we did not take proper measures in the first place. Yet, our government’s decision-making seems to take serious action only when issues are considered current and vital, which may in turn prove to be our downfall.

Our government not only responds until a problem becomes extremely serious but it also makes decisions in a painfully slow manner and for the wrong reasons. In order for a bill to get passed, the process is one that is both long and deliberate. The bill goes through a ten step process that includes everyone from the Senate to interest groups having a voice. Moreover, at each point of the process a bill can fall through which causes only four percent of bills actually get passed. The hardships in getting a bill passed makes it difficult for any major legislation about environmental and climate change troubles to get through. As a result, our environmental and climate change troubles are moving at a faster rate than our legislation. This in turn will come back to haunt us at a later date when we realize that our policies are outdated to the complexities of the environmental and climate change problems. Not even our communication technologies will be able to save our delayed response because, as seen by the fairly recent example of Hurricane Katrina, our government is not able to repair the damage of environmental disasters well. Also, many issues surround governmental leaders when making decisions. This makes verdicts much more multifaceted than the matter at hand. A person in Congress or the Senate must look out for his own interests when voting for environmental or climate change policies. For instance, a Congressman will vote to strike down environmental legislation despite his own personal beliefs if he receives money from a business that may become hurt by environmental legislation. Furthermore, a partisan political climate currently exists and a vote on environmental and climate change may be more of a competition between parties than actually doing what is right. Thus, our governmental structure is built in such a way that both competition and other interests may prevail over taking the correct route and fighting against a potential collapse from environmental problems and climate change.

Aside from our own society’s vulnerability to collapse, I would also like to take a look at China: a society of current importance whose governmental system is completely different from our own. In contrast to our own democratically built system, China is a communist government with all its power centralized at the top and less in the hands of the people. Though China presently appears to be a thriving country, in actuality there exist problems in its governmental system that parallel collapses of previous nations. China’s problems seem similar to the problems associated with the collapse of Easter Island. Easter Island culture imploded because its leadership decided that deforestation was permissible for the purpose of building of statues. Similarly, China’s government places an importance on spending money for the military while its people live in desperate poverty. The Easter Island story provides a lesson that wrongly steered leaders can lead a culture into collapse. If China ever enters what some consider a destined war with the United States, then the government leaders will presumably poor vast amounts of money into the military and possibly take away any available money necessary for its people’s survival. A more modern example than Easter Island of wrongly steered leaders causing collapse is the fall of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union spent a vast amount of money in trying to keep up with the United States in an arms race while its people were living in conditions of poverty. Thus, China seems to be heading down the same slippery slope as the leaders of Easter Island and the Soviet Union with its wrongful prioritizations.

I find the examples and issues in *Collapse* more than just a simple learning tool but rather a premonition of the future collapse of our culture. Globalization, dutiful leaders, modern medicine, technology, and greater knowledge of past cultures are useless when one’s government and “just in time” problem solving approach is not a capable match to the problems currently facing our world. My examples of cultures that are vulnerable to collapse include the two most powerful countries today and include two completely different types of government. Thus, collapse may strike any country of our current world. Though society seems far from collapse, it is just a ticking bomb before our environmental and climate change troubles prove so large that our government and problem-solving tactics cannot handle such a big dilemma and thus collapse will occur.