ending extreme poverty, disease, environmental degradation, war? we asked one of the world’s most influential economists—adviser to kofi annan and bono alike—what would have to be done to put the world on a course to do exactly that. what follows is his modest little plan.

it is increasingly hard to believe the old adage that “people get the government they deserve.” despite having everything going for it—wealth, technology, unchallenged military might—the united states is facing a spiraling crisis made in washington: a budget deficit of gargantuan proportions, a voracious military budget that buys us neither security nor peace of mind, a reckless neglect of man-made climate change, and a foreign policy that in three short years has made us one of the most feared countries on the planet. this is a crisis, i believe, that reflects profoundly misplaced priorities regarding america’s relations with the world. in this article, i want to advance some concrete ideas on how to set those priorities right.

in spite of our problems, i am an optimist—not an incorrigible optimist, but one based on facts. it is for this simple reason: the key problems that we have are all indeed solvable. every great challenge that we face—climate, biodiversity, global health, extreme poverty, growing violence, and the “clash of civilizations”—can be solved, and at modest cost and with huge long-term benefit. we’re facing the bargain of a generation, a chance to fix the world and forge a prosperous and peaceful place for the rest of the century.

the world is racked by instability resulting from “failed states,” places where hunger, death, and disease flourish and where young men rampage in the face of poverty, mass unemployment, lack of education, and hopelessness. yet the problems of extreme poverty are not the visitations of god’s plagues on corrupt and hapless nonbelievers, but rather the result of societies suffering from the lack of health clinics, a shortage of schools and teachers, lack of rural roads, and the like. these countries need major investments in social services and infrastructure but simply lack the resources. the result is a poverty trap in which solvable poverty gets only deeper because the basic investments needed to overcome it are beyond the means of the country, while the scale of financial help from the united states, european countries, and other rich nations is much too limited to make a breakthrough. remarkably, the united states is spending about $450 billion for the military to defend itself against global threats but only about $13 billion to fight the underlying conditions of poverty, disease, and despair that provide the breeding grounds for these global threats.

it’s possible to add up, with some precision, what financial resources would actually be needed from the rich countries to help end this extreme poverty and thereby set today’s unstable and desperate societies—ethiopia, haiti, bolivia, afghanistan, and dozens of countries like them—on their way to self-sustaining economic growth. by helping these countries rise above extreme poverty, we would also enable them to become stable neighbors and trading partners instead of havens of terror, disease, unwanted mass migration, and drug trafficking.

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It’s a wonderful thing to have a detailed, fact-filled engagement, one that gets past sound bites and posturing. When disagreements arose, we actually engaged in open debate, not just the same speeches spoken in different churches. The commission actually reached a consensus. We found that the health of the poor world is indeed within reach. It’s not a crazy dream but a hardheaded financial analysis. It’s important to acknowledge that improved health care for the world’s poor is not enough for the kind of worldwide breakthrough that we should seek. To help Africa, Central Asia, the Andean countries, and other regions of the impoverished world escape from their economic and social misery, the rich world would have to help these countries make major investments not only in health, but also in education, roads, power, water, sanitation, and more. One might imagine that such a full panoply of help really would be too expensive for the U.S. and the other rich countries. But that guess, surprisingly, is wrong.

As in the WHO project, I’ve been asked to help lead an assessment of this time as a special adviser to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The UN Millennium Project, which I’m honored to direct for the secretariat general, is looking into the broad range of policies and investments that would be needed to help spring 750 million people from the poverty that cripples their lives and destabilizes the world. Once again, the strategy is what I’ve come to call “analytical deliberation,” meaning a detailed and thorough discussion and analysis with people from many different specialties and interest groups.

The UN Millennium Project’s work will not be completed until 2006, but the project is as heartening as the findings of the WHO commission. Specifically, the end of abject poverty is within reach. It’s not a crazy dream but a hardheaded financial analysis. The poor countries exercise responsible leadership on their part and the rich world pitches in to help finance the clinics, schools, roads, power stations, and soil improvements, not only could Africa survive, but it could thrive. Not only would today’s hot spots cease to be terror havens, but they could become respectable players in a world economy that would be much more effective at spreading economic prosperity.

As a first approximation, we have found that in addition to $25 billion or so for investments in health, we’d probably need another $50 billion or so from the rich world to address the interconnected challenges of education, roads, and the rest, for a total of about $75 billion per year. Perhaps half of that, roughly $35 billion, could come from the donor countries. Sweden, for example, gives 0.87 percent of its own GDP, while the U.S. currently gives just 0.13 percent of its own. The shocking fact, unknown to most Americans, is that the U.S. contribution to development aid, when measured as a percentage of GDP, is actually the lowest of any of the twenty-two donor countries. Sweden, for example, gives 0.87 percent of its GDP, while the U.S. currently gives just 0.13 percent of its own. If the poor world was currently giving $25 billion per year on a per capita basis, we might need to give another thirty-five to fifty cents to get the job done. In 2002, the Bush administration actually promised, in an international agreement known as the Monterrey Consensus, to make “analytical efforts” toward contributing 0.7 percent of GDP to developing aid, which would be more than enough to address the needs of the poorest countries. The White House has ignored the goal from the moment it signed the Monterrey document, and you, dear reader, have almost surely not noticed this.

The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman proclaimed that the terrorist’s attack of September 11, 2001, was the start of World War III, and that for our global community, this was an apocalyptic reality. Another alternative was a more hopeful, less filling prophecy hit in the Madrid bombings. When the U.S. responded to 9/11 with a war on Iraq based on ill-informed or phony preposterous concerns about weapons of mass destruction and links to al Qaeda, Spain joined our erroneous war and has now been brutally targeted by radical Islamic terrorists. The violence has not ended, only in Madrid, but it is a wake-up call that crossbones across East Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Our war on terror is doing more to foment violence than it tamp down. Before it’s too late, let’s understand that we are not in a twilight struggle for survival, that September 11 did not change

Solving humankind’s most pernicious problems is possible for each of us. We are facing a unique, historic opportunity, and the U.S. is at the center of this international movement. Harlem Brundtland, to bring together a bunch of hardheaded and realistic people. At the start of the process, the finance folks from the IMF and the World Bank were wont to blame the poor for much of their misery. “If only they would stop spending money through corruption and mismanagement, they’d have better health care.” The public-health folks were wont to look at the situation from the opposite point of view. “If only the poor weren’t so sick all of the time, they’d have the energy and wherewithal to earn their way out of poverty.”
for the health crisis in Africa and other tortured regions of the rich world— and here I refer to the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—has an annual income of about $25 trillion, so we are talking about one thousand or so from the rich world to address the interconnected challenges of education, roads, and the rest, for a total of about $75 billion per year. Perhaps half of that, roughly $35 billion, could be used, for example, to fund schools, roads, power stations, and soil improvements, not only could Africa survive, but it could thrive. Not only would today’s hot spots cease to be terror havens, but they could become respectable players in a world economy that would be much more effective at spreading economic prosperity.

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Something very important happened in the shadow of the Holocaust, with its six million victims of a disease, and unsafe childbirth, and poor families choose to have many fewer children in response to the higher survival rates. So how much would it cost to achieve these fabulous results? About $25 billion per year from the rich world could do the job, permitting a massive attack on AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, vaccine-preventable diseases, and unsafe childbirth, among other killer conditions.

So $25 billion seems like a lot until one realizes that the same rich world— and here I refer to the rich world of Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—has an annual income of about $25 trillion, so we are talking about one thousand or so from the rich world to address the interconnected challenges of education, roads, and the rest, for a total of about $75 billion per year. Perhaps half of that, roughly $35 billion, could be used, for example, to fund schools, roads, power stations, and soil improvements, not only could Africa survive, but it could thrive. Not only would today’s hot spots cease to be terror havens, but they could become respectable players in a world economy that would be much more effective at spreading economic prosperity.

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everything (unless we let it do so), and that it’s time to get back to the real challenges facing us and our world before it’s too late too. There is a world-threatening crisis and people died at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. At least ten thousand people die every day from AIDS, TB, and malaria.

I am not advocating a retreat in the face of terrorism, but I am advocating being a lot smarter and less brutal. President Bush is Terrorist cells must be tracked down and stopped, but you don’t do that by doing this in ways that alienate the entire world. The war in Iraq was the opposite of what was needed. It inflamed Iraq, and U.S. citizens and U.S. sympathizers like Spain are being targeted in dozens of countries. The State Department’s “travel advisories” cover vast swathes of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, seriously disrupting tourism, foreign investment, and trade. In the name of national security, the U.S. has canceled or delayed student visas for thousands of Muslim students from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, as well as for students from many other countries, which will among young and educated students who are likely to be tomorrow’s leaders.

We forget that people in other countries are living and breathing their own earth, one as beautiful and as hard as ours. New York depends on an astounding array of institutions to protect public health, to keep the water supply safe, to chase down cases of SARS, TB, and West Nile, and to keep the city’s bridges, subways, and power grids functioning. And it all works, most of the time, as long as the city keeps investing in the future. The real struggle is living together on a crowded planet.

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The single most important fact of global society is that there are now 6.3 billion of us, rising to 8 to 9 billion by mid-century, and 8 to 10 billion by the end of the last century. The result is that we are putting pressures on the land and the oceans at an alarming rate, and we will continue to ignore the dire consequences of our own actions. Scientists reported this year that almost all of the world’s great ocean fisheries are in a precipitous decline from overfishing. At the same time, long-term, man-made climate change is beginning to wreak havoc and industrial revolutions are taking place that turn the summer’s one-in-five-thousand-years heat wave in Europe.

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More to the point, we will see about two billion people added to the world’s cities in the poor nations of the world, which would be enough to pay. They are not mere objects of our manipulation. The vast majority of the Islamic world would like nothing more than to live peacefully with the United States, with mutually beneficial trade, and with their children studying at U.S. universities. And yet this same vast majority has utterly lost faith in U.S. intentions, as with all the poor countries, been blind to their struggles for economic survival and dignity, tried to impose colonial-style occupation in Iraq and failed miserably to promote a balanced two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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More to the point, we will see about two billion people added to the world’s cities in the next thirty years. Will teeming populations be walled off with separate ghettos, or will we integrate them? Will we see a new wave of emigration? Is Super Bowl Sunday an unanswerable challenge for the local and global environment?

The Bush administration has been particularly mean-spirited in its attacks on the scientific community, a combination of true ignorance of science and a campaign to court the fundamentalist-Christian vote. In 2001 a Gallup survey found that only 12 percent of Americans actually subscribe to the modern Darwinian theory of evolution, with another 37 percent declaring their belief in a God-directed evolution. A remarkable 45 percent of Americans prefer a fundamentalist version of creation. While we might wish to believe that this is harmless, it’s not, because it gives fundamentalists a moral and political base from which to make their case. We can’t really afford that luxury. Not only are many of the scientific literate illiterate about the creationists on first claims on increasingly scarce global oil supplies. Yet the Bush administration has been particularly mean-spirited in its attacks on the scientific community, a combination of true ignorance of science and a campaign to court the fundamentalist-Christian vote.

Take the example of the Wall Street Journal, which has been a bastion of scientific ignorance since 1989. In 1600. We don’t need a war to secure our energy resources; we just need to act like grown-ups who have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on war even though there is enough on the planet to go around.

The fight over scarce resources was of course the driving force of human society for millennia, but the science-based technologies of the past two hundred years offered an alternative, an escape from the natural struggle “red in the tooth and claw.” By harvesting the vast stores of energy via hydrocarbons, solar electricity, wind power, and hydroelectric power, we have been able to break out of the narrow constraints of survival. Ancient solar power, buried in petroleum and natural-gas deposits, now feeds the global energy system. Solar power can be used to generate electricity; current solar power, harvested in photovoltaic cells, can help fuel an information revolution in the villages of Africa and India. We are not running out of oil. We are not running out of energy. War may be needed if it is true that petroleum might become scarce in the next few decades. Oil may become more scarce, but technologies already exist that could convert stockpiles of coal into liquid petroleum, or even into hydrogen and other energy carriers, in supplies that will last for centuries. But to use these alternatives safely and cheaply, there is considerable work to be done to improve these technologies and forge new environmental policies so that these energy sources could be used safely. Our government has barely even recognized the task ahead, much less addressed the significance of those public investments that will need to be achieved.

In short, we are wasting hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of lives trying to secure (continued on page 144)
A Simple Plan

[Continued from page 129] Middle Eastern oil fields when a small fraction of that amount invested in alternative energy sources would provide longer lasting, cheaper, and cleaner energy for generations to come. Herein lies the cost of having a government that downplays and derides the power of scientific inquiry.

6) Though our natural bounty is vast, we are wrecking it nonetheless

For no good reason other than wanton carelessness and ignorance of science, we are on a crash course to undermine our climate, our oceans, our rain forests, our fellow species. We are willfully ignoring the evidence. Long-term climate change is real, and it is dangerous. We are already witnessing, most likely, the early signs of massive and unpredictable swings in the earth’s climate system. Long-term droughts over parts of Africa, Europe’s extraordinary heat wave last summer, massive droughts in the American southwest, and other extreme events may be just bad luck, or something more. What seems clear is that “once in a century” events are arriving much more frequently than once in a century. And recent evidence suggests that such changes augur massive species extinctions and huge risks for many food-growing regions of the world.

The situation is just as dramatic regarding the major ecosystems that sustain and enrich our lives—coral reefs, rain forests, ocean fisheries, mangroves, wetlands. In every dimension of the earth’s biological environment, the bulging world population, combined with wanton disregard of man-made impacts, is leading to disaster. Yet again, with a combination of prudence, science, and long-term investments in our future of small amounts of our income today, we could forestall or reverse many of these dire outcomes. If we set aside a few tens of billions of dollars per year—a fraction of the Iraq war costs or the tax cuts for the richest 5 percent of American households—the resulting budget deficits will be the least of our worries. But the U.S. climate crisis is about more than climate change. It is about what is needed in additional U.S. defense spending. We should go further. For the super-rich, we need to enjoy our prosperity, build flexibility into our energy systems, and manage our needs with a vast panorama of all that we can accomplish. Yet we got off to an unusually bad start. We failed to correct the Bush tax cuts for the richest 5 percent of American households—the resulting budget deficits will eventually be paid for by all of us, as the White House proposes, those budget cuts are successively plugged by spending cuts, the laissez-faire by the working class will overwhelm the meager tax savings they might have received. Only the richest 15 percent or so of taxpayers would benefit financially from the Bush tax cuts when the tax cuts are offset by broad-based spending cuts. The fact of the matter is that the super-rich in the United States have walked away with the gold in recent years, and they will have to be the first to pay up—to close the budget deficit, help the world’s poor, and invest in an ecologically sane and sustainable future. The working classes are right to be ticked off, but the Bush tax cuts simply dug them into an even deeper hole. The first step of recovery would be to reverse the Bush tax cuts for the top 20 percent of households, thereby recouping around 40 percent of the revenue reduction. We should go further. For the super-high-end taxpayers, we should institute a “save the world” surcharge, directed toward helping the world’s poorest people. There are around 635,000 taxpayers with a taxable income above $500,000 per year. These super-rich have a combined income of about $1 trillion, an average of roughly $1.5 million per taxpayer; if we collected just 5 percent of their income above $100,000, the tally would be about $35 billion per year, or about what is needed in additional U.S. development aid to the world’s poorest countries. New funding for the world’s richest people would share a small percentage of their vast income to help save millions of people each year from death in the world’s poorest countries.

7) We should demand much more from the super-rich

Our super-rich have praised for tax cuts that they don’t need and have run away from their international responsibilities. There are exceptions—Bill Gates, George Soros, Gordon Moore—who have turned their vast wealth back into public service. But these great philanthropists are rare. The current arrangements, in which America’s super-rich get richer while the world’s extreme poor die of starvation, will no longer do. If the super-rich don’t step up to the plate, they will end up the victims of a social explosion, within the U.S. and from the rest of the world.

The simplest step is to reverse President Bush’s tax cuts. When “Upper West Side academicians” such as I call for reversing the tax cuts, we are immediately accused of elitism, of not understanding how hard it is to make ends meet in America. But the tax cuts have dramatically worsened the prospects of the working class, not improved them. Lower- and middle-income households that supported the tax cuts have been hauled. President Bush told them that everybody would win via the tax cuts, though some (the rich) would get more than others (the working class and poor), simply because they pay more taxes. But this is sheer sophistry. While the tax cuts went overwhelmingly to the rich—nearly 80 percent of the tax cuts for the richest 5 percent of households—the resulting budget deficits will eventually be paid for by all of us, as the White House proposes, those budget cuts are successively plugged by spending cuts, the laissez-faire by the working class will overwhelm the meager tax savings they might have received. Only the richest 15 percent or so of taxpayers would benefit financially from the Bush tax cuts when the tax cuts are offset by broad-based spending cuts. The fact of the matter is that the super-rich in the United States have walked away with the gold in recent years, and they will have to be the first to pay up—to close the budget deficit, help the world’s poor, and invest in an ecologically sane and sustainable future. The working classes are right to be ticked off, but the Bush tax cuts simply dug them into an even deeper hole. The first step of recovery would be to reverse the Bush tax cuts for the top 20 percent of households, thereby recouping around 40 percent of the revenue reduction. We should go further. For the super-high-end taxpayers, we should institute a “save the world” surcharge, directed toward helping the world’s poorest people. There are around 635,000 taxpayers with a taxable income above $500,000 per year. These super-rich have a combined income of about $1 trillion, an average of roughly $1.5 million per taxpayer; if we collected just 5 percent of their income above $100,000, the tally would be about $35 billion per year, or about what is needed in additional U.S. development aid to the world’s poorest countries. New funding for the world’s richest people would share a small percentage of their vast income to help save millions of people each year from death in the world’s poorest countries.

8) The U.S. is not the new Rome . . . and shark goodness

The nations proclaimed the U.S. to be the new Rome. It’s not a good precedent. Russia long ago imagined itself as the Third Rome (after the Roman Empire and Constantinople, seat of the Eastern Empire). If we persist in such illusions, we’ll eventually follow Russia in going right near the precipice. The U.S. has a strong economy and an overpowering military, but it has neither the means nor the will to use them to try to take the world. In fact, the Chinese economy is likely to be larger than ours, and even India might catch up in a total purchasing power. Nothing like disease, the world’s center of gravity will shift toward Asia, if not the political variant of creationism. In fact, U.S. economic preeminence has resulted from favor and favorable territory, most favorable political and economic institutions, the willingness to take in hardworking and creative immigrants from all over the world, and an early and sustained embrace of science and technology. But America’s success can and will be replicated elsewhere, and the world will be better for it. Japan, a decidedly non-Western power, seized its opportunity in the nineteenth century. China has begun to surge from the late 1970s, and India is on the ascent today. In all these cases, the same commitment to education, science, and technology that propelled America as what propels these countries as well. The spread of prosperity is very good news for the world. Poverty is falling and incomes are rising, not at the expense of U.S. well-being, but by extending the benefits of scientific and technological knowledge to a widening portion of humanity. And with prosperity comes a democracysteady and social stability as well.

9) If we lead, Washington will follow

Science and technology, mobilized by an ethic of shared responsibility, can fight hunger, and forestall or mitigate long-term climate change. But we can do it only as we say we are the first country to have a first truly national man history that could actually bring about an end to extreme poverty on the planet. With prudence and long lead times, we could also invest in the R&D and new infrastructure to enjoy our prosperity, build flexibility into our energy systems, and manage our needs consistently with the growing global ecological challenges. In short, through cumulative processes of research, we are inheriting the world’s greatest surge of scientific and technological knowledge and of a world less divided by economic ideologies than ever before. Our new millennium opened with a vast panorama of all that we can accomplish. Yet we got off to an unusually bad start, not only because of September 11, but even more because of our disastrous response to that day. Yet there is still time to get this right. Across America, we have a chance to set a new course, without waiting for Washingtion this time. Since our leaders won’t lead, you and I and millions like us will have to take up the cause in our stead.
A Simple Plan (continued from page 129) Middle Eastern oil fields hold a small fraction of that amount invested in alternative energy sources would provide longer lasting, cheaper, and cleaner energy for generations to come. Herein lies the cost of having a government that downsplays and derides the power of scientific inquiry.

4) Though our natural bounty is vast, we are wrecking it nonetheless

For no good reason other than wanton carelessness and ignorance of science, we are on a crash course to undermine our climate, our oceans, our rain forests, our fellow species. We are willfully ignoring the evidence. Long-term climate change is real, and it is dangerous. We are already witnessing, most likely, the early signs of massive and unpredictable swings in the earth’s climate system. Long-term droughts over parts of Africa, Europe’s extraordinary heat wave last summer, massive droughts in the American southwest, and other extreme events may be just bad luck, or something more. What seems clear is that “once in a century” events are arriving much more frequently than once in a century. And recent evidence suggests that such changes augur massive species extinctions and huge risks for many food-growing regions of the world.

The situation is just as dramatic regarding the major ecosystems that sustain and enrich our lives—coral reefs, rain forests, ocean fisheries, mangroves, wetlands. In every dimension of the earth’s biological environment, the bulging population, combined with wanton disregard of man-made impacts, is leading to disaster. Yet once again, with combination of prudence, science, and long-term investments in our future of small amounts of our income today, we could forestall or reverse many of these dire outcomes. If we set aside a few ten billions of dollars per year—a fraction of the Iraq war costs or the tax cuts for the richest 5 percent of households—the resulting budget deficits will have to be paid for by all of us, as the White House proposes, those budget deficits will be eventually plugged by spending cuts, the huge home by the working class will overwhelm the meager tax savings they might have received. Only the richest 15 percent or so of taxpayers would benefit financially from the Bush tax cuts when the tax cuts are offset by broad-based spending cuts.

The fact of the matter is that the super-rich in the United States have walked away with the gold in recent years, and they will have to be the first to pay up—to close the budget deficit, help the world’s poor, and invest in an ecologically sane and secure future. The working classes are right to be tired off, but the Bush tax cuts simply dump them into an even deeper hole. The first step of recovery would be to reverse the Bush tax cuts for the top 20 percent of households, thereby recouping around 40 percent of the revenue reduction. We should go further. For the super-high-end taxpayers, we should institute a “save the world” surcharge, directed toward helping the world’s poorest people. There are around 350,000 taxpayers with a taxable income above $500,000 per year. These super-rich have a combined income of about $1 trillion, an average of roughly $3.5 million per taxpayer. If you collected just 5 percent of their income alone $500,000, the tally would be about $35 billion per year for the group, or about $6 billion per year toward the war of terror. The biggest mistake is to believe that U.S. economic preeminence has resulted from a vast and favorable territory, most favorable political and economic institutions, the willingness to take in hardworking and creative immigrants from all over the world, and an early and sustained embrace of science and technology. But America can and will be replicated elsewhere, and the world will be better for it. Japan, a decidely non-Western power, seized its opportunity in the nineteenth century. China has begun to surge from the late 1970s, and India is on the ascent today. In all these cases, the same commitment to education, science, and technology that propelled America as what propels these countries as well. The spread of prosperity is very good news and enriching poverty is falling and incomes are rising, not at the expense of U.S. well-being, but by extending the benefits of scientific technology to a widening portion of humanity. And with prosperity tends to come democracy and social stability as well.

9) If we lead, Washington will follow

Science and technology, mobilized by an ethic of shared responsibility, can fight hunger and, hopefully, mitigate long-term climate change. But we can do it only if we try. We are the first generation in human history that could actually bring about an end to extreme poverty on the planet. With prudence and long lead times, we could also invest in the R&D and new infrastructure to enjoy our prosperity, build flexibility into our energy systems, and manage our needs consistently with the growing global ecological challenges. In short, we have the lucky inheritance of the world’s greatest surge of scientific and technological knowledge and of a world less divided by economic ideologies than ever before. Our new millennium opened with a vast panorama of all that we can accomplish. Yet we got off to an abysmally bad start, not only because of September 11, but even more because of our disastrous response to that day. Yet there is still time to get this right. Across America, we should set a new course, without waiting for Washington, and millions like us will have to take up the cause in their stead.

The neocons proclaimed the U.S. to be the new Rome. It’s not a good precedent. Russia long ago imagined itself as the Third Rome (after the Roman Empire and Constantinople, seat of the Eastern Empire). If we persist in such illusions, we’ll eventually follow Russia in going right over the precipice. The U.S. has a strong economy and an overpowering military, but it has neither the means nor the will to do the same. The Chinese economy is likely to be larger than ours, and even India might catch up in total purchasing power. Barring a global disease, the world’s center of gravity will shift toward Asia, so those great powers choose a technological gap that opened during the past two centuries. The biggest mistake is to believe that U.S. dominance is today in the result of some God-given favor guaranteed to keep U.S. on top. The self-congratulatory view of America as the world’s unique “shining city on the hill” is the political variant of creationism. In fact, U.S. economic preeminence has resulted from vast and favorable territory, most favorable political and economic institutions, the willingness to take in hardworking and creative immigrants from all over the world, and an early and sustained embrace of science and technology. But America can and will be replicated elsewhere, and the world will be better for it. Japan, a decidedly non-Western power, seized its opportunity in the nineteenth century. China has begun to surge from the late 1970s, and India is on the ascent today. In all these cases, the same commitment to education, science, and technology that propelled America as what propels these countries as well. The spread of prosperity is very good news and enriching poverty is falling and incomes are rising, not at the expense of U.S. well-being, but by extending the benefits of scientific technology to a widening portion of humanity. And with prosperity tends to come democracy and social stability as well.

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Science and technology, mobilized by an ethic of shared responsibility, can fight hunger and, hopefully, mitigate long-term climate change. But we can do it only if we try. We are the first generation in human history that could actually bring about an end to extreme poverty on the planet. With prudence and long lead times, we could also invest in the R&D and new infrastructure to enjoy our prosperity, build flexibility into our energy systems, and manage our needs consistently with the growing global ecological challenges. In short, we have the lucky inheritance of the world’s greatest surge of scientific and technological knowledge and of a world less divided by economic ideologies than ever before. Our new millennium opened with a vast panorama of all that we can accomplish. Yet we got off to an abysmally bad start, not only because of September 11, but even more because of our disastrous response to that day. Yet there is still time to get this right. Across America, we should set a new course, without waiting for Washington, and millions like us will have to take up the cause in their stead. 

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