What can you learn from 5,000 years of history? Are we in truly novel times, or do we face the same problems that the Romans and Egyptians faced 2,000 years ago?

Will & Ariel Durant, Pulitzer Prize winning historians, are famed for writing The Story of Civilization, a massive 9766-page, 11-volume treatise of the entirety of Western history. Thankfully, they compiled the most important recurring patterns in history in this book, The Lessons of History.

Ray Dalio, founder of the world’s largest hedge fund Bridgewater, considers this one of his 3 must-read books. I’m not a history buff, but a bunch of smart thinkers (e.g. Dalio, Bill Gates, Marc Andreessen) are, partially because it builds pattern recognition and improves prediction accuracy.

In this The Lessons of History summary, learn:

- How human nature hasn’t changed over thousands of years
• How freedom and equality are fundamentally opposed to one another
• How societies cycle between wealth inequality and redistribution, like a heartbeat
• What repeatedly threatens democracy to turn into tyranny
• Why all civilizations, including ours, fall, and why we shouldn’t cry about it.

The Lessons of History is beautifully written; the sentences are a pleasure to read. I say this rarely and recommend you read it if you liked this summary.

Full title: The Lessons of History, by Will & Ariel Durant

1-Page Summary of The Lessons of History

• The laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history - humans are subject to the trials of selection and the struggle for existence, like all other animals. The group and nation merely inherits the will of the individual.
• Human nature has largely been unchanged throughout history - the means change, but the motives stay the same.
• Inequality among humans is inherent in the unequal distribution of inborn ability. This is magnified by the complexity of civilization, as each invention is seized by the strong to make themselves stronger, and the weak weaker.
  ◦ Freedom and equality are fundamentally opposed. The best that egalitarians can hope for in a free society is an approximate equality of legal justice and educational opportunity.
  ◦ Society is made up of the imitative majority and the innovating minority. “History in the large is the conflict of minorities; the majority applauds the victor and supplies the human material of social experiment.”
• Culture, custom, and morals provide a useful social stabilizing force, and a dampening force on innovation. New changes need to be put through the crucible of criticism before overthrowing the result of centuries of experiment.
• Morals change with the times as a reflection of what is necessary to grow and survive.
  ◦ Hunting/gathering promoted survival at all costs, including fighting and killing, and gluttony during the rare feast.
  ◦ Agriculture spurred the importance of hard work and regularity more than violence and bravery.
  ◦ Industry promoted individualism separated from the family; materialism and mass consumption; and delaying marriage along with premarital sex.
  ◦ [Likewise the information age promotes destruction of national boundaries, niche personalization rather than mass consumption, critical thinking above brute force labor.]
• Religion has been constantly present in history.
  ◦ On the positive it has given “supernatural comforts” to many, even the most unfortunate, and provided social stability through divine surveillance and moral prescriptions handed down by gods.
  ◦ On the negative it has been used as a tool of the state to legitimize power, has seen corrupt
abuses of power (eg the Crusades).
- Religion trades balance with laws - as laws and government improve, religion is less important in state stability.
- “As long as there is poverty there will be gods.”
- Every economic system must rely on some form of profit motive to stir people to productivity.
- **The constant friction in societal structure is between the rulers and the ruled.**
  - The natural progression of government is from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy and back again.
    - Democracy passes to monarchy/tyranny when civil strife weakens the state, revolution is threatened, and a figure arrives promising security and opportunity for all.
  - **Like a heartbeat, societies alternate in cycles of wealth concentration and redistribution (violent or peaceful).**
    - Communism has taken on capitalist flair to stimulate productivity, and capitalism has taken on socialist programs to curb discontent with inequality, and so the two converge.
- War is also a constant, there being only 268 years of no war in 3421 years of history.
  - **War occurs for the same reason individuals fight - to secure more resources and power, for pride, to survive under threat.**
    - The state inherits the will of the individual, without the individuals’ normal boundaries. The state that is strong enough defies interference with its will and has no superstructure it is beholden to.
    - Philosophers will muse about the futility of war, but generals understand that war is the final arbiter of history.
- Civilizations have grown and decayed with great regularity.
  - The decay comes as a failure of leadership to meet new challenges (be it natural or manmade) and often finalized with a defeat in war.
  - While likely inevitable, the fall of our civilization is not to be bemoaned - what is created in the civilization can be immortal. More people read Homer today than in his time.

### History and the Earth

- “Geography is the matrix of history.”
  - Civilization habitually develops along waterways - rivers, lakes, oceans - to provide life and offering inexpensive routes of transport and trade.
    - Egypt and Nile, India and Ganges, Italy and the Tiber/Arno/Po, France and the Rhone.
    - For 2000 years the Mediterranean hosted the battles of the “white man’s ascendency.”
  - The airplane neutralizes some advantage of waterways, allowing inland countries (Russia, China, Brazil) to develop.
- “Climate no longer controls us, but it limits us.” “A tornado can ruin in an hour the city that took a century to build.”
- But at the end of the day “man, not the earth, makes civilization” by transforming the possibilities
Biology and History

- “History is a fragment of biology” - “all the chronicles and achievements of man fall humbly into the history and perspective of polymorphous life.”
  - “The laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history.” We are subject to the trials of evolution, the struggle for existence, like all other animals.
  - “If some of us seem to escape the strife or the trials it is because our group protects us; but that group itself must meet the tests of survival.”
- Life is competition.
  - “Animals eat one another without qualm; civilized men consume one another by due process of law.”
  - Cooperation is real but serves mainly as a form of competition with other groups (whether it’s our family, church, political party, race, or nation).
  - “Our states, being ourselves multiplied, are what we are; they write our natures in bolder type, and do our good and evil on an elephantine scale.”
  - “War is a nation’s way of eating.”
- Life is selection.
  - Some organisms succeed and some fail. Some individuals are better equipped than others to survive - “we are all born unfree and unequal.” “Nature loves difference as the necessary material of selection and evolution.”
  - “Inequality is not only natural and inborn, it grows with the complexity of civilization.” Every invention is seized by the exceptional individual and makes the strong stronger, the weak weaker.
  - “Freedom and equality are sworn and everlasting enemies, and when one prevails the other dies.”
    - The best that egalitarians can hope for is an “approximate equality of legal justice and educational opportunity. A society in which all potential abilities are allowed to develop and function will have a survival advantage in the competition of groups.”
- Life must breed.
  - Nature selects for abundant reproduction.
  - High birth rates tend to accompany less developed civilizations, and at times a low birth rate nation is “chastened by some more virile and fertile group.”
  - Differential birth rates change power dynamics within and between nations. Faster-breeding groups grow in economic and political power (the authors note Roman Catholic families will be dominant in the US by 2000).
- Nature has three agents for restoring the balance of overpopulation: famine, pestilence and war.
  - Malthus feared that uncontrolled birth rates would outstrip food production.
  - So far technology has tended to keep pace with births, with the rising population also itself contributing more producers of food.
Race and History

- 1800s French elitist Gobineau believed that a civilization’s success depended on the quality of the race.
  - He stressed that environmental advantages cannot explain the rise of civilization, since similar soil-fertilizing rivers that watered Egypt produced no civilization in North America.
  - He saw degeneration of civilization when intermarriage with the conquered race.
  - He also believed in a superior Aryan race.
- American Madison Grant confined achievements to a branch of Aryans he called “Nordics” - Scandinavians, Baltic Germans, Anglo-Saxon Americans
  - He believed these northern tribes swooped down South and conquered, invading India and setting the caste system to prevent intermarriage; creating the Athenians and Romans of the Republic; and conquered England, France, Italy.
  - He bemoaned the thinning of Nordic stock through wars and higher birth rate of Alpine and Mediterranean peoples, though credited the Mediterranean race with superior intellectual and artistic attainments.
- The Durants reject all this in *The Lessons of History* - **“history is color-blind and can develop a civilization (in any favorable environment) under almost any skin.”**
  - Ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Rome civilizations counter the notion of Aryan superiority, with much Oriental source.
  - “Would any of the white races” have done better in Africa? “It is remarkable how many American Negroes have risen to high places...in the last one hundred years despite a thousand social obstacles.”
- “The South creates the civilizations, the North conquers them, ruins them, borrows from them, spreads them.”
  - Nordic Dorians game down through Balkans and destroyed the proto-Greek Mycenaean culture; after several centuries the Athens/Sparta/Lesbos Greek culture emerged, then spread through the Mediterranean.
- Civilization development is a factor of geographic opportunity and economic and political development. “It is not the race that makes the civilization, it is the civilization that makes the people.”
  - People who live in new areas adopt the new culture.
  - Ethnic mixtures over centuries create a new type of people and culture.
- “There is no cure for [racial] antipathies except a broadened education. A knowledge of history may teach us that civilization is a cooperative product, that nearly all peoples have contributed to it.”

Character and History

- Man’s character sets the character of groups and nations.
- Human nature includes both positive and negative, balancing action vs inaction; fight vs flight; acquisition vs avoidance; association vs privacy; mating vs refusal; parental care vs filial
dependence.

- Has human nature changed? “Known history shows little alteration in the conduct of mankind.” Means change; motives remain the same.

- The poor have largely the same impulses as the rich, with only less resources or ability to implement them. “Nothing is clearer in history than the adoption by successful rebels of the methods they were accustomed to condemn in the forces they deposed.”

- Evolution in man has been social and cultural rather than biological, transmitted to generations by imitation, custom, or education.

- A minority of people are “heroes of action,” pushing past the customs of culture to adapt society to new situations.
  - “At times his eloquence, like Churchill’s, may be worth a thousand regiments. If he is a prophet like Mohammed, wise in the means of inspiring men, his words may raise a poor and disadvantaged people to unpremeditated ambitions and surprising power.”
  - Society is made up of the imitative majority and the innovating minority. “History in the large is the conflict of minorities; the majority applauds the victor and supplies the human material of social experiment.”

- The stabilizing force of culture is important, since many new ideas may be inferior to the status quo. No one “can come in one lifetime to such fullness of understanding as to safely judge and dismiss the customs or institutions of his society, for these are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history.”
  - Thus “the conservative who resists change is as valuable as the radical who proposes it.”
  - New ideas should “go through the mill of objection, opposition, and contumely; this is the trial heat which innovations must survive before being allowed to enter the human race.”

Morals and History

- Morals are the rules by which a society exhorts its members to behavior.
  - Moral codes look superficially different, but they are quite universal and necessary.

- **Morals change with the times and economic engine, from hunting to agriculture to industry**
  - **Hunting**
    - Anything that promoted survival was paramount, including fighting and killing.
    - Gluttony during the rare feast to store energy for scarcer times.
    - Continuous reproduction was important to make up for high death rates.
    - Many men may die on the hunt, and so some men took multiple women, and every man was expected to help women to frequent pregnancy.
    - Loyalty to the tribe, wariness of outsiders.
    - “Man’s sins may be the relics of his rice rather than the stigmata of his fall.”
  - **Agriculture**
    - Hard work became more vital than bravery, regularity more than violence, peace more than war.
    - The family was the unit of production, with the father at the helm.
    - Children were economic assets; birth control was made immoral.
    - Males were trained in farming from childhood, and became ready at 15 to set off
on his own.

- Female chastity was important to increase chances of suitors and avoid unsupported motherhood. Equal survival of both genders promoted monogamy.
  - **Industry**
  - Families separated.
  - People worked as individuals, individually paid. Females entered the workforce.
  - Economic maturity to support a family came later, delaying marriage. Delaying marriage made chastity difficult. Nonreproductive sex was helped by contraception.
  - Education spread religious doubts.
  - Materialistic philosophies arose.

  - [Doubtless the character has changed again with the Information Age, now prizing niche personalization instead of mass consumption, further destruction of global boundaries, and redefining of social groups around interest rather than mere geography]

- **War makes for moral laxity.** Citizens see their savings taxed away, women have unprecedented freedom, soldiers had tasted adventure and learned to kill.
- **Sin has flourished in every age,** including prostitution, gambling, alcohol.
  - So our current time of moral laxity may not be unprecedented, and it may be self-correcting - “our unmoored children may live to see order and modesty become fashionable; clothing will be more stimulating than nudity.”
  - Much of our modern moral freedom is good - “it is pleasant to be relieved of theological terrors, to enjoy without qualm the pleasures that harm neither others nor ourselves.”

- **But history is the tale of the exceptional, while eschewing the many stories of the ordinary.** Behind the facade of war and politics, murder and adultery, were millions or orderly homes and affectionate people.
- **“Civilizations decay quite leisurely” - Rome lasted for 5 centuries.**

### Religion and History

- **Even the agnostic historian has to acknowledge that religion has functioned and been seemingly indispensable in every land and age.**
  - “There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.”
  - Religion has provided hope for billions of people - even the unhappy, the suffering, the bereaved, the old enjoy “supernatural comforts more precious than any natural aid.”
  - It has enabled stability by “transforming human covenants into solemn relationships with God.”
  - Said Napoleon, it kept the poor from murdering the rich - “supernatural hope may be the sole alternative to despair. Destroy that hope, and class war is intensified.”
  - “The masses of mankind desire a religion rich in miracle, mystery, and myth.”
- In the earliest formation of religion, gods seem to have been created to explain natural events (earth, water, winds, sky), without a clear moral purpose. Spurred by fear, religion became the worship of natural forces.
• Gradually religion included moral prescriptions handed down by gods, and in so doing became a useful ally/servant of the state.
  ○ Yahveh gave the 10 commandments to Moses; Thoth gave law to Menes in Egypt; Shamash gave Hammurabi a code for Babylonia.
  ○ Very useful was the religious justification of rulers (as in pharoahs and kings) - setting up clear perverse incentives.
  ○ Religion provided general social stability, providing paths for conflict resolution through courts and softening penalties exacted by barbarian law.
  ○ Religion always tried to maintain clear precedence over the state, however, claiming an international court to which all rulers were morally responsible.

• But as with all humans, religious leaders can be weak, leading to a variety of abuses of power:
  ○ Justification of the Inquisition, holy wars, and the Crusades [no doubt with the superficial intent of spreading the gospel, but with the underlying incentive of accreting more power and followers and suppressing dissent]
  ○ Kings forced the Church into hypocritical acts, like dissolving the Jesuit order.
  ○ The Church committed fraud through bogus relics and dubious miracles; “False Decretals” forged documents to give a “sacred antiquity to papal omnipotence.”
  ○ The Church played little part in the abolition of slavery, “the outstanding advance of modern morality.”

• Other forces also weakened religion’s foothold:
  ○ Scientific doubt, beginning with the Copernican model of the solar system and incrementally explaining the formerly supernatural (growth in life, disease, natural disasters).
  ○ Splintering into Protestant sects.
  ○ Bible criticism suggesting not one author (Moses) but rather the work of many people over centuries.
  ○ Exposure to other cultures with similar but different religions, causing dissonance around what the One True Text is
  ○ Repulsion from the idea of a vengeful God, creating billions of non-believers who were predestined to everlasting hell.

• Secular alternatives appeared for religion’s functions:
  ○ Education formerly done by priests became done by secular teachers
  ○ Supernatural moral codes are replaced by propaganda of patriotism, capitalism, or Communism
  ○ Laws that were religious decrees became the “confused commands of fallible men.”

• Yet religion survives because “it appeals to imagination, hope, and the senses...its mythology consoles and brightens the lives of the poor” and those “wearied with the uncertainty of reason.”
  ○ Religion has a habit of resurrection, being periodically destroyed by the state or philosophers, but reborn in different forms.
  ○ “Religion and puritanism prevail in periods when the laws are feeble and morals must bear the burden of maintaining social order; skepticism and paganism progress as law and government permits the decline of the church, the family, and morality without basically endangering the stability of the state.”
   - Communist states have dissociated themselves with religion, and the “success of this experiment in Russia” [and more notably recently China] suggests the
replacement of religion with Communism or capitalism.

- Should these states fail to destroy mass poverty, the state may once again “wink at
the restoration of supernatural beliefs as an aid in quieting discontent.”
  - Moral disorder may yet still generate a religious revival.
  - “As long as there is poverty there will be gods.”

- The authors conclude that history does not support a belief in God as a benevolent supreme being,
given the various natural and man-made atrocities unleashed on human life. It may instead support
a theological dualism wherein a good spirit and an evil spirit battle for control of the universe.
  - “Nature and history do not agree with our conceptions of good and bad; they define good
as that which survives, and bad as that which goes under - the universe has no prejudice in
favor of Christ as against Genghis Khan.”

### Economics and History

- Much of history can be interpreted sensibly through the economics lens, as a contest among
individuals, groups, and states for resources and economic power.
  - Eg economic ambition launched a thousand ships, not Helen’s face.
  - Crusades were attempts to capture trade routes to the East; discovery of America was a
result of the failure of the Crusades

- Not all activities are primarily economically motivated - like the teachings of Buddha or the
nationalistic fervor of Hitler’s troops. The motives of leaders may be economic, but the passions
of the masses may not be.
  - In some cases military might may cause rather than result from economic operations, like
Bolshevik revolution, or army coups in South American history, or Mongol conquest of
Asia

- “The men who can manage men manage the men who can manage only things, and the men who
can manage money manage all.”
  - “So the bankers rise to the top of the economic pyramid,” financing wars and popes,
sparking revolutions.

- **“Every economic system must sooner or later rely upon some form of the profit motive to
stir individuals and groups to productivity.** Substitutes like slavery, police supervision, or
ideological enthusiasm prove too unproductive, too expensive, or too transient.”

- The concentration of wealth is a natural result of the concentration of ability.
  - The degree of concentration depends on the economic freedom permitted by morals and
laws - democracy allowing the most liberty accelerates it.

- **Concentration of wealth and redistribution (violent or peaceful) cycle in civilizations like a
heartbeat.**
  - Concentration may reach a point where the strength in the many poor rivals that of the few
rich; then the unstable equilibrium requires either legislation redistributing wealth or by
revolution distributing poverty.
  - Athens in 594 BC saw inequality, and statesman Solon instituted reforms to reduce
personal debts and establish progressive income tax. The rich protested this as
confiscation, but within a generation the consensus was he had saved Athens from
revolution.

- The Roman civil wars were motivated in part by uprising of the plebs.
- The Reformation is in part a redistribution of Catholic Church wealth by reducing payments to the church and appropriating church property and revenues.
- The US was able to peacefully redistribute in the 1930s-60s.

Socialism and History

- Nothing instills the spirit of competition and inventiveness and exhaustive labor, in a decentralized un-monitored way, like capitalism and self-interest do.
- Yet elements of socialism - like state control of commerce, wide government employment, price controls, welfare, progressive taxation, redistribution of wealth, large public works - have reoccurred throughout history.
  - As in Sumeria in 2100BC; Egypt under the Ptolemies (300BC); Rome under Diocletian (301AD); China in 140BC and in 1068 (Wang An-shih); the Incas until the 1500s.
- Socialism is especially palatable under threat of security - “internal liberty varies inversely as external danger.”
  - Such was true in Diocletian Rome, where individual liberty had to be subsumed to collective liberty under the threat of barbarians; and in Communist Russia, following the fall of the disgraced Czarist government leading to internal disorder and threat of external attack.
- Socialist institutions are commonly overturned when
  - the authorities become corrupt, no longer returning taxes to benefit the populace
  - high taxation causes indolence, resentment, and escape to lower-tax societies
  - revolt spurred by those whose profits are cut short (often the rich mobilizing the masses)
  - disasters (natural and manmade) cause upheaval and discontent
- In the modern day communism has taken on capitalist flair to stimulate productivity; and capitalist societies have taken on socialist programs to curb discontent with inequality; and so they continue to look more like each other

Government and History

- Durant believes that “the first condition of freedom is its limitation; make it absolute and it dies in chaos.” The government’s role is to establish order, and an organized central force is preferable to distributed private force.
- Plato saw the natural progression of government from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy to tyranny [more here].
  - Monarchy is possibly the most natural form of government, descending from the father of the family or the chieftain of a tribe. However since succession is often hereditary, leaders become prone to incompetence, laziness, and excess. A saner alternative is more distributed responsibility, like:
Aristocracy, where the elite hold power and train their offspring to rise to governance. This provides meaningful stability in morals and culture, but is also prone to corruption and hedonism. Hence the masses (stirred partly by the rich merchants who feel constrained) overthrow them, leading to:

- Democracy, with greater individual liberty than all the other forms. Morals weaken, the customs of old are washed away, and wealth inequality intensifies as a consequence of unequal concentration of inability. **If uncontrolled, the civil strife between the rich and poor erupts and opens an opportunity for:**
  - Tyranny, where an authoritarian leader promises to solve the problems.

- Such was the progression in Greece:
  - Beginning with aristocracy in Pericles (460-430BC). With the defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the **demos** or lower class rose to power.
  - Civil strife between oligarchs and democrats led to assassinations. Plato condemned the violence, moral decadence, and love of money stirred by democracy.
  - The gap between rich and poor widened. The rich flaunted their wealth, the poor schemed to redistribute through legislation, taxation, and sometimes murder of creditors and the rich. The rich in turn entrenched against the poor.
  - The rich distrusted democracy as “empowered envy,” and the poor distrusted it as a “sham equality of votes nullified by a gaping inequality of wealth.”
  - This bitterness left Greece divided when Philip of Macedon conquered in 338 BC, leading many to welcome his coming as preferable to revolution.

- And in Rome:
  - 300-200BC: Roman oligarchy with army conquered the Mediterranean. Conquered peoples were brought to Italy as slaves. Native farmers joined the proletariat in cities. General returned with spoils.
  - By 50BC: Money replaced land as political power, rival factions purchased candidates and votes. Citizens who voted the wrong way were sometimes killed. Government became corrupt.
  - Aristocrats engaged Pompey to maintain power; commoners sided with Caesar, who won and established dictatorship. He was killed by aristocrats, but Augustus ended and became a dictator.

- “It is unnatural for a majority to rule, for a majority can seldom be organized for united and specific action, and a minority can. If the majority of abilities is contained in a minority of men, minority government is as inevitable as the concentration of wealth.”

- Does history justify revolutions?
  - In **The Lessons of History**, Durant believes the effects achieved could be had through gradual development instead of violent upheaval, which risks loss of sanity around breaking continuity.
  - Revolutions try to redistribute wealth, but because wealth is the means of production rather than goods, the natural inequality of man soon recreates inequality. “The only real revolution is in the enlightenment of the mind and the improvement of character.”

- Much of historical “democracy” does not deserve the title, not giving true equal access to opportunity for all.
  - America had better initial conditions, with the precedence of the Magna Carta, defending citizens against the state, and of Protestantism, which gave religious liberty. It eased rebellion with ample free land and minimal legislation. It was also mostly protected from
foreign powers by seas.
- Modern democracies are more successful in redistributing wealth to give such access to education and public health. “The rights of man are not rights to office and power, but the rights of entry into every avenue that may nourish and test a man’s fitness for office and power.”
- But if the government loses interest in the well-being of citizens, workers become more resentful of losing economic freedom, inequality intensifies, civil strife continues, or substantial outside threat materializes, an opportunity opens for a tyrant to rise, promising opportunity and security for all.
  - “Education has spread, but intelligence is perpetually retarded by the fertility of the simple” who may be manipulated.
- Commentary on modern art (which Durant seems to hate, calling it “collages of debris”): “The producers of such nonsense are appealing not to the general public...but to gullible middle-class purchasers who are hypnotized by auctioneers and thrilled by the new.”

### History and War

- **War is a constant in history**, there being only 268 years of no war in 3421 years of history.
- War occurs for the same reason individuals fight - to compete for more resources and power, for pride, and to survive under threat.
  - “The Ten Commandments must be silent when self-preservation is at stake.”
  - “Peace is an unstable equilibrium, which can be preserved only by acknowledged supremacy or equal power.”
- The state inherits the will of the individual, without the individual’s normal boundaries. The individual is constrained by morals and laws, because the state guarantees him basic protection in exchange for his submission. The state is strong enough to defy interference with its will, or because there is no superstate to offer it protection.
- Nationalism gives added force in diplomacy and war.
  - Improving communication and means of indoctrination made nationalism far more effective and pervasive than centuries past, involving civilians and combatants.
- Philosophers will wax about pacifism, but generals believe that war is necessary and, in the military interpretation of history, the final arbiter.
  - What would have happened to our heritage if not protected against Mongol invasions?
  - “A long peace may fatally weaken the martial muscles of a nation.”
- What to do about communism today [1970s], if it threatens to engulf Asia, Africa, and South America?
  - Young nations long to imitate the rapid state-controlled industrialization of Russia.
  - Should America, at the height of its power, withdraw and let hostile states encroach; or should it consider what future generations wish they had done? Should it resist once, fight on foreign soil, and make the necessary sacrifice to protect America and democracy?
  - The philosopher will suggest that the destructiveness of weapons is unprecedented and a new approach should be tried in defiance of history. The President should be conciliatory, agreeing to mutual peace and commitment to avoid subversion, seeking mutual
understanding and chances to learn from one another, attempting a radical experiment in history.

- The general laughs, thinking the philosopher has forgotten all of history and the competitive nature of man. The general believes some fundamental differences cannot be negotiated away, that subversion will continue happening regardless of what is said on the surface, and that world order will come by so decisive a victory by a great power that it will dictate international law. Groups unite only in the face of a common enemy, and that mankind will become one only it faces a foreign enemy together.

Growth and Decay

- In The Lessons of History, Durant defines civilization as “social order promoting cultural development.” Social order is granted by political order of custom, laws, and morals, and economic order through production and trade.

- Looking back at history, all civilizations have ended. What are the patterns of civilization’s growth and decay?

  - There are frameworks to consider the cycles of civilization - largely one of coherent construction, then of individualistic deconstruction.
  - Civilizations often begin as a conquest of one group by another, and the spreading of the victor’s modus operandi.
  - Growth occurs as a result of taking advantage of a physical boon (land, water); directing people to productive work; to internal tension between the rulers and the ruled; of meeting external challenges (human or natural) and overcoming them.
  - Decay occurs as a failure of political or intellectual leaders to meet new challenges - natural disaster, improper uses of resources, economic changes, energy-sapping taxation, class war, external threat, moral upheaval through education leading to secularism. A major defeat in war may bring the final blow.
    - On secularism: “the moral code loses aura and force as its human origin is revealed, and as divine surveillance and sanctions are removed.” This happened in the century before Christianity, as skepticism and rationalism overtook mythology.
    - Elitist Durant: “a society may find itself divided between a cultured minority and a majority of men and women too unfortunate by nature or circumstance to inherit or develop standards of excellence and taste. As this majority grows it acts as a cultural drag upon the minority; its ways of speech, dress, recreation, feeling, judgment, and thought spread upward, and internal barbarization by the majority is part of the price that the minority pays for its control of educational and economic opportunity.”

- Does history necessarily repeat itself?
  - By and large it has because human nature is a relative constant, and it reacts in stereotyped ways to frequently occurring situations like hunger and danger.
  - But in The Lessons of History, Durant argues we are in an unprecedented time of development, where individuals are more differentiated than in primitive societies, and many novel circumstances will arise that demand novel responses. “There is no certainty
that the future will repeat the past.”

- Inevitably civilizations will fall, but this is not something to be bemoaned. **What is gone is the frame; what was created in that civilization can be immortal.** “Civilizations are the generations of the racial soul,” passing its patrimony onto heirs.
  - eg More people read Homer today than in his time.

### Is Progress Real?

- It depends on how you define progress.
  - Is Shakespeare better than Aeschylus? Nietzsche over Confucius?
  - As we become more secular, have we developed a natural ethic strong enough to keep us from our baser instincts? Or will we crawl back to the order of religion?
  - If “the replacement of chaos with order is the essence of art and civilization,” does this explain why contemporary painting is chaotic, symbolizing our civilization’s relapse into confusion?
- **“History is so indifferently rich that a case for almost any conclusion from it can be made by a selection of instances.”**
- If defined as “increasing control over the environment,” there is certainly progress.
  - Quality of life for the average person is way up compared to primitive times. “If undertakers are miserable, progress is real.”
- If defined as “increase in happiness its case is lost almost at first sight.”
  - Humans shall always “find an excuse for being magnificently miserable; there is a stealthy pleasure in rejecting mankind or the universe as unworthy of our approval.”
- Yet human nature has seemed largely fixed; science and technology are new means of achieving the same old ends - acquisition of goods, sex, power.
  - Science is neutral - it can kill us as readily as it will heal.
  - We are “the same trousered apes at two thousand miles an hour.”
  - We romanticize our ancestors who had to worry only about their local village.
- The achievements of civilization (fire, wheel, language, agriculture) have passed from one to the next - “they are the connective tissue of human history.”
  - Interrupt this transmission for 100 years and we return to being savages.
- Education is the transmission of our “mental, moral, technical, and aesthetic heritage” - and this heritage is richer than ever before, including all of Greek thinking and the Italian Renaissance.
- History is the creation and recording of this heritage. Progress is its increasing abundance, preservation, transmission, and use.