

Ask A Genius 6 - The Middle Road of the Future

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What's the middle-of-the-road view about the future?

There's a couple of things. World War II ended in 1945, which was 71 years ago. People might have the idea that we've reached the end of large wars. However, if you look back into history, somebody did a study, and the average period between large international conflicts that suck in entire continents is 150 years.

So, we're not beating any international records in not having large international conflicts. To the Americans, the early part of the 21st century has looked bad. We had 9/11. The Afghanistan War is the longest in US history. We had the Iraq War and its aftermath. None of those things are ending clean or particularly optimistically.

However, if you look at the casualties, Iraq and Afghanistan killed fewer than 5,000 Americans compared to Vietnam that killed 50,000. World Wars killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. Even though, things look dire. The actual net effect on Americans as a statistical whole hasn't been that miserable, except if you're looking at things like unemployment.

It is tough to blame our wars entirely for the employment problems that we've had. Things look terrible because awful stuff that happens in the Middle East doesn't affect that many Americans. Because things haven't been terrible in truth doesn't mean they can't be terrible.

The 20th century was much more terrible in terms of mass death compared to the 21st century. World War I had tens of millions of deaths. The Flu Epidemic in 1919 had tens of millions of deaths. World War II had tens of millions of deaths. Chairman Mao killed millions of people. Stalin killed millions of people. We haven't had that in the 21st century, but could have it.

What if somebody decides to bioengineer something terrible? You could have an epidemic that results in tens of millions of deaths. We haven't had terrible stuff happen so far. However, looking at history, we won't get out of the 21st century without some terrible stuff.

It might be a lot of regional wars because of climate change migration, population pressures, migration, and so on. We're at 7.3 billion people now. At the end of the century, we're probably going to be pushing 11 billion, and mostly in developing countries. That will put pressure on food production and land ownership.

It might push regions into war. Regional conflicts could coalesce into larger conflicts. Some groups say the odds of a terrorist group setting off a dirty bomb aren't that low. It's hard to set off a nuke that acts like a nuke. That does nuclear fission. The bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it's easier to attach nuclear materials onto traditional explosives, and then send that into a city and make much of the city radioactive. That would freak out the world. It's technologically easy. You need the material.

You have to be able to get into a city. Terrorists have shown the ability to get into Western cities. They could set one off and kill many people. The 21st century looks like it might have some scary stuff happening.