



Breaking Ground

CHARTING OUR FUTURE
IN A PANDEMIC YEAR

Edited by Anne Snyder and Susannah Black

Mark Noll, N.T. Wright, Gracy Olmstead, Jennifer Frey,
Michael Wear, Danté Stewart, Marilynne Robinson,
Christine Emba, Tara Isabella Burton, Phil Christman,
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PREFACE

ANNE SNYDER AND SUSANNAH BLACK



HINDSIGHT IS TWENTY-TWENTY, or so they say. It will be many years, though, before we understand the new normal that the *year 2020* has carved. As *Plough Quarterly's* Peter Mommsen wrote while Covid-19 was tearing through North American hospitals in that first spring of felt apocalypse:

In a time of crisis—whether a pandemic, a terrorist attack, or a war—people are quick to say that “things will never be the same.” This comes from an understandable urge. Faced with suffering of such magnitude, our instinct is to find meaning in it by claiming it has shifted the course of history. In reality, while some things may change in the wake of the pandemic, most will not. This crisis reveals many truths, but in itself will not transform or heal or renew.

These were wise words, and the book you hold in your hands is a diary written in the spirit of their prudence. But it is also a record of human beings striving for humility before an onslaught of uncertainty and rapid adjustment—humility that is the necessary soil for hope to seed a more intelligent and humane future.

Comment magazine created *Breaking Ground* out of a sense that 2020 offered a *kairos* moment—an opportunity to recalibrate tired cultural values and ways of thinking, and to renew particularly fragile spheres like education, health care, media, and politics with a recovered moral purpose oriented toward our actual makeup as human beings, and toward serving the needs of the commons. Launching publicly just hours after the first memorial service was held for George Floyd, the project soon stretched to engage even more painful—and long-standing—realities of injustice than we had foreseen in the “mere” context of Covid-19. Urgent questions came at us like hail on a tent just pitched: How do our institutions

preserve their ideals while pruning their habituated hypocrisies? Where are wise and courageous leaders we can look to for guidance and cooperate with in trust? Is it possible to have an honest reckoning with our sins as nations, and come out better and closer on the other side? Where are the bridge-builders, peacemakers, place-makers, and justice-builders working in appreciative tandem?

These longings, and the crises fueling them, were strained further by something that began to feel like an epistemological crisis. Forced into physical isolation for months on end, we all seemed to careen into magnified shadow. Years of intensifying political idolatry ruptured into in-group splintering and betrayal. Distrust of vested authority festered into conspiracy and new, totalist explanations as to what was really motivating what. The media sprinted to keep up with events and articulate their meaning, but most interpretations were weighted by partisan conviction and zero-sum moral narratives. We started to hate one another just a few shades more. We started to feel like we were going crazy.

So *Breaking Ground*'s task became still more basic. Our editorial team and the twenty partner institutions that supported us gradually realized that we couldn't just seek to equip God's people to serve the suffering in this chaotic season, but that we had to try to nurture a shared sense of reality for all, whatever our faith or politics. And we needed to do so without falling into the trap of faux-neutrality, mere proceduralism, and the perpetual postponement of the need to grapple with the question of the Good. We needed something stronger than civility.

This book memorializes that quest. *Breaking Ground* hosted a public conversation for one year between June 2020 and June 2021—commissioning essays and hosting virtual events and podcasts inspired by the Christian humanist tradition to respond imaginatively to the year's public-health, economic, racial, and political crises. You'll find signature voices from the spheres of politics and policing, education and journalism, medicine and business, theology and science, philanthropy and technology, and the family and household too. You'll find students of history and exemplars of social solidarity. You'll find a space where complex truths have been aired in public, where conversation has been

rigorous in its search for truth yet grace-filled in its respect for the human face.

The two of us discovered a friendship as we built *Breaking Ground*, a friendship born out of our shared desire for Christians and Christian institutions to be more confident in recognizing the resources they possess as goods worth offering to our broader society—an unparalleled anthropology and a this-worldly incarnational care directed and sustained by an eternal hope. We committed ourselves to creating a space that might be of service to all, Christian or not, and find ourselves now not just preserving a record of a historic time but also stewarding the seeds of a new public sphere.

This book is in one sense the annals of a harrowing year. But it is also, at least by implication, a set of proposals for that new public sphere, a set of schematics and prompts for the building of a true and strong commons. This is a period in which nearly every corner of society, secular and sacred, has been stopped short at the question of unity. That is not a question that can be solved from the outside, but has to be tried afresh from the inside. In our case, and in the case of the writers you are about to read, we and they have been animated by an encounter with a God who is alive and redeeming yet. Not everyone believes that, but that doesn't shake its truth. And we're tasked with living in, and seeking to help order, a world where those who do believe that and those who don't are our beloved family, our fellow citizens, and our friends. This book is an invitation, a recipe book, and a citizenship manual for the future that we now have to build, the garden that we now have to tend, in the ground that this past year has broken.

Yours,

Anne Snyder
Founder, *Breaking Ground*
Editor-in-Chief, *Comment*

Susannah Black
Senior Editor, *Breaking Ground*
Senior Editor, *Plough*

November 2021

SUMMER



ANNE SNYDER

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DOUG SIKKEMA

JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

PATRICK PIERSON

JENNIFER FREY

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MICHAEL WEAR

DANTÉ STEWART

JOE NAIL

BENYA KRAUS

June 1, 2020

FOUNDING VISION

ANNE SNYDER



DEAR READER,

These are deeply disorienting times. Many of us are losing loved ones and livelihoods—to Covid-19, to racial violence and injustice. All of us are having to loosen our grasp on familiar rhythms and assumed futures. The institutional, economic, and social backdrop is a mess, and many of our vocations have been yanked into a violent gem-tumbler, the somersaults revealing little of where we're headed or how long we'll have to keep spinning.

Historically, change of this scope has created moral opportunity. The question is whether our societies harbor the discerning capacities to see it as such, whether they have the humility to accept it, and whether they enter the crisis with the baseline social and civic health required to do something about it—productively.

Welcome to *Breaking Ground*, a collaborative web commons created by *Comment Magazine* to inspire a dynamic ecosystem of thinkers and doers to respond to the needs of this hour with wisdom and courage. In a founding partnership with *Plough Quarterly* and seventeen other organizations, we've worked to create a space where the sacred lens might influence the wider conversation, where the painfully fragmented body of Christ might come together in humility and urgent calling, and where the ecumenical church with all her scars might be better resourced to lead—in service, sacrifice, and solidarity. If you see something of your hopes echoed here, please do get in touch. We are eager to build a big tent of collaborators.

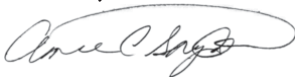
Over the next year, *Breaking Ground* will convene world-class scholars and seasoned practitioners, artists and pastors, community-weavers and those made resilient by long-standing struggle to contribute original essays and participate in our podcast and virtual events. We will also celebrate and point you toward the work of those people, publications, and organizations that are providing particularly insightful moral leadership, weaving a broader tapestry that we hope will unearth an ecosystem that already exists but rarely sings as one.

This adventure officially begins the first week of June. All content on *Breaking Ground*—whether original or curated—is motivated by the following three needs:

1. **Seeing clearly and deeply:** What exactly is being revealed in this layered crisis? About society? About the state of our own hearts?
2. **Learning from the past:** How have plagues historically provided opportunities for new beginnings, new building, a renewal of institutions?
3. **Imagining the future:** What institutions need renewing now, and how might that happen? What might be born anew in this time, and how might God's people help in the building?

This is at heart a rethinking project aimed at community-building, one that seeks to offer a creative lens borne out of two thousand years of Christian social thought and the witness it has inspired time and again. It's never easy to imagine new wineskins, to say nothing of stitching and sewing them. But as followers of Christ we believe there is a model for living that still has power to orient our hope, perhaps even direct our steps. We hope you'll come along.

Humbly,



Anne Snyder
Editor-in-Chief, *Comment*

June 4, 2020

FROM ASHES

Renewing the World in an Age of Crisis

SUSANNAH BLACK



IT'S A STRANGE time to build.

We've lived through what seem to be many worlds since February. They come in quick succession, as the layers of the everyday have been, so painfully, peeled back to reveal stranger and more frightening landscapes.

Given that reality, how can we have the heart to begin a project? So many of the thoughtful policy analyses and cultural reflections of January seem hopelessly naive, aimed at a world so much more stable and tame than the one we live in now.

One of the things that this *Breaking Ground* project is meant to do is look, carefully, at where we are. Where, then, are we?

Well, in the middle of a pandemic, for one thing. Not at the top of our minds in the last few days, but that fact remains. And it's taught us some things. We've been isolated, physically, these last months, but the world before Covid-19 had allowed us to be isolated in other ways. We had thought that we didn't need each other, that our choices affected only ourselves.

But the first thing this epidemic did was reveal that as a lie. We are deeply embodied beings. And the first thing we did was respond, for the most part, to the call to socially distance as a way to

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care for each other with our bodies. Given the reality of a virus that can live in the air between us, we can no longer look at questions of care and responsibility and even nonviolence in quite the same way. Voltaire famously said that “my right to punch you in the nose ends where your nose begins.” But the method of transmission of the Covid-19 virus is a synecdoche for the fact that an individualistic, rights-based discourse that sees our responsibility as ending at the barrier of our own skin is profoundly inadequate.

We can see more clearly than at any other time in recent memory that this is a problem which must have a society-wide response; at the same time, however, what each of us chooses to do from day to day matters vitally. We can see vividly that wisdom in leadership matters, and that wisdom in “followership” matters too. We can see that both local networks of friends and larger political bodies are absolutely vital in helping us survive. And we can see that death is real, that it cannot be dodged, and that this requires a certain reckoning. We’ve been thrust into a mass *memento mori* moment.

We had thought that we were, perhaps, immune to the human condition: that death might have a technical fix, that politics might be brought down to a manageable level where neither real conflict nor real love had a place, that history might have drawn to a sort of stultified, if not entirely satisfying, conclusion, that questions about what lies beyond this life and about the mysterious nature of our selves might be . . . well, shelved, in favor of complimentary two-day shipping on our tchotchkes.

That is, very obviously, not the case. The metaphysical questions that we have always asked are very much alive: Is there a Good to which just laws, and their just and honorable enforcement, correspond, and against which bad laws and the abuse of authority may be judged? Is there a future for us, as selves, beyond death, and is there a possibility of true fellowship and loyalty in our lives together here, even if only an imperfect echo of something we hope for?

Can we hope for peace?

These questions have, in the past few weeks, been brought even more sharply into focus. I found myself, in the midst of the news about George Floyd’s death and the protests, nostalgic for two weeks ago, when we had seemed to be united against the disease, at least:

simpler times. But we are now living after that murder, reminded once again of the fact that for many in our society, the pandemic is not the only thing to fear, and that the just peace which is the common good had been very imperfectly realized even before this latest pandemic. Police should be, are meant to be, the agents of true and harmonious civic order, acting to preserve peace by securing justice. In far, far too many cases, they have failed in this. The civil order that had felt pacified is not one that has been experienced as peaceful by many. Black Americans and others, not least those left behind by a runaway market, have often not experienced this land as safe, or as welcoming, or as theirs. They have not reliably experienced themselves as represented by the government; it has not, as effectively as it ought, borne their image into the public sphere; they have too often not been able to say, This is *our* government.

In a time like this, peace seems simply a hope. At the moment it is easy to feel as though, at root, the world simply is clamor and violence. Perhaps history has only ever been an ongoing, slowly-rolled-out tragedy of incompatible demands clashing by fire and flash grenade at night. Perhaps reality is not, after all, to be trusted.

—

Early on in the virus there was a common refrain invoked almost without thinking—namely, “When life gets back to normal . . .” But now, in view of all that’s happened, what is the normal we will go back to? More lockdown? Unemployment? The fear of each other as carriers of disease? Our elders locked away in nursing homes, neglected, to die alone? This is not, we may think, the part of history we signed up for. And because we tend to have such short memories, it may seem as though there is no hope, no way forward.

That’s why another part of the *Breaking Ground* project will be a consultation of our cultural memory. Our cities, our societies, have memories of pandemics, of war, of massive disruption. These are the things we read about in the Scriptures, in our history books. We have been, to a large degree, insulated from the reality of how the world is. But now, as we say the daily office or pray the Psalms, we find—I have found—a shock of recognition. Yes, the world the Bible describes is, simply, our world—complete with a natural world that

we don't fully control, with injustice and civil strife; complete, too, with God's care for us, and his rule, and his audacious, militant challenge to the dominion of death. It's all real.

These are the times that test what we are and whose we are. Where is our allegiance? For those who claim to know Jesus, has our Christianity been a game, so that when the evils that we said we knew were in the world, and in our society, show themselves plainly, we are caught flatfooted? To say that we have hope, and love for our neighbor and for our enemy, and faith in God's goodness and power, when we are comfortable, is one thing. To call ourselves Christians in the thick of battle, when the world seems to have had its pretty veneer ripped off—that's another thing altogether.

That battle is joined, and it is against all the enemies of the human race: against disease and poverty, against the wrong in our society and in our own hearts, the greed that would measure human lives by lost corporate profits, the vicious callousness that would turn an arrest into a murder, the intemperance that would turn a protest, through the alchemy of escalation and retaliation, into a vicious cycle of violence, and perhaps above all, the cowardice and love of comfort that just wants it all to go back to normal, that tells us we shouldn't have to deal with this, that it's not fair, that somehow we can opt out of being where and when we are.

But this time is our time. This is our struggle, and we are called to walk though it together. In the face of the pandemic and all its myriad consequences, in the face of George Floyd's murder and our clashes over what to do and how to respond, we must not abandon each other.

—

In any successful political movement, the crucial element is solidarity. A group bound together in a good struggle that allows itself to be torn apart by factionalism, or by suspicion and resentment, or by ineffective leadership unable to address injustice, will fail. This past Sunday, we Western Christians celebrated Pentecost. "Lord, send out your Spirit," many prayed, "and renew the face of the earth." What Pentecost is is the inauguration of God's political movement here on

earth. And the solidarity that we must have is solidarity among all the members of the human family.

That solidarity will be attacked. Every opportunity will be used to destroy the bonds of fellowship between those who ought to know each other as brothers and sisters: human beings, the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. What will be most sorely tested are the faith, hope, and love that prevent us from despairing that peace, that wholeness and health, will ever be ours.

It seems like a fanciful thing to ask for. Peace? What is it, even? Is it a cop-out? Is it entitlement to ask for peace or hope for it?

I think that that depends on what you mean.

We have no right to go back to normal, and we have no right to an existence without conflict. We have no right to be just left alone, to not need to ask questions about what justice looks like and where it has gone wrong. In that sense, we have no right to a peace that is pacification, that is an end to the conversation.

What we have instead is a calling, a duty, to fulfil our natures as the political and social animals we are, by learning to live in just and honest friendship with each other. It's not easy, because it does take realizing, if we're white, that we don't know what it is like to be a black person in America. It's all right that we don't: no one can inhabit another's life, and no one should. But again, we have the calling, the duty, to learn to live in friendship with each other: not by erasing difference or denying it, but by seeking the justice, the equity that gives to each man and woman what he or she is due. One of the things that we owe each other is listening ears, and the conversation that, through language, can lead us humans to true communion with each other. We don't get to opt out of that conversation, because we are part of each other's political community and each other's lives; because beyond America, we are families, ethnicities, nations that are given to each other to be part of the community of communities that is this world, called to paint a picture of the peaceable kingdom to come.

That peace is not a cease-fire, and it's not an uneasy coexistence. It is the rich and just common life that allows each man and woman to find his or her fulfillment in the common and, ultimately, joyful project of a harmonious polity. We need each other for this.

We cannot do it without each other. We cannot, finally, be ourselves without each other.

—

As we watched, all too able to believe what we were seeing, as George Floyd's breath was crushed out of him—as we watch, unable to believe what we're seeing, as our cities seem to be turned to places we can't recognize, and as just protest is in danger of being drowned out by the white noise of chaos and confusion—as we dread what retaliation will look like, picturing a cycle of escalation that leaves those cities wastelands—as we crave just and responsible leadership, the first thing we have to do is lament.

The virus attacked our bodies, the bodies of our elders and those weakest among us. The shutdown attacked our spirits and our hope, as savings—if there were any—dwindled, and as we all tried to see into the mystery of the future we had assumed would be more or less like the past. This murder, and what we have seen since the murder, reveal a society profoundly fragile, still riddled with racism and racial division, attacking itself like a body with an autoimmune disease. And I'm writing this on Monday night, when the president has just threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807, which will allow the military to be deployed against US citizens on US soil. You who read this will know better than I what will happen in the next several days. How can we even talk about the concept of a common good, of shared justice, of peace, when everything that comes across our screens seems to sneer at the idea?

But we are going to do just that.

It's a strange time to build.

But what we are building is, we think, one of the things needed right now: a media project and community that is an attempt at a wise response to an unprecedented time; a response that both accompanies readers and contributors through this time, and helps us think together about what might come afterward. Because the third major aspect of the *Breaking Ground* project is to imagine, and work for, a future that is profoundly better than that half-forgotten world of December 2019. This is an opportunity. To build this now is to take responsibility for the moment we are in, and to respond

in such a way that, when we look back, we will see blessing, and see that we were able to be a blessing to others.

In 1977, Óscar Romero was appointed archbishop of San Salvador. At the time, El Salvador was a nation in violent upheaval: In response to long-term structural injustices in Salvadoran society, which was sharply divided between rich and poor, left-wing guerrilla groups, supported by the Soviet Union and by other Soviet-bloc countries, staged incursions against the right-wing junta in charge, which was supported by the Carter administration in the United States; the government's death squads, in response, carried out kidnappings and assassinations on a large scale. Romero saw both the leftist groups and the government as his children to shepherd—baptized Catholics, they were, almost all of them, who may or may not have been practicing, whose practice may or may not have been a show of piety. He spoke to all, commanding repentance and forgiveness: a repentance and forgiveness based on acknowledgment of truth. And he was killed for this, by agents of the state police, murdered as he was saying Mass.

A wise and careful pastor, he found that his role was to observe and condemn patterns of injustice and oppression—but to remind his flock, too, of the need for personal holiness, loving obedience, and solidarity at every level. He was scathing in his condemnation of particular crimes by those in the government who ought to have been, *whose calling was to be*, the agents of God's just order in the country, but he refused to condone violence in response. He never for a moment lost sight of God's love for each person in his care, even when those persons could see in each other only the face of an enemy. He never held out forgiveness and reconciliation as easy tasks, but he never ceased to command them—for all. And he reminded his people, always, that this fruitful and honest unity of justice and peace in their country could only be the work of God himself.

“We are simply preaching the kingdom of God,” he wrote, “which means pointing out sin in any human situation, even when the sin is found in political and economic situations. . . . Those who are in sin must . . . renounce all forms of injustice and selfishness and violence.” But he wrote too that “there can be no freedom as

long as there is sin in the heart. . . . What's the use of violence and armed force if the motivation is hatred and the purpose is to buttress those in power or else to overthrow them and then create new tyrannies?" he asked.

What we seek in Christ is true freedom, the freedom that transforms the heart. . . . That doesn't mean accepting the situation, because Christians also know how to struggle. Indeed, they know that their struggle is more forceful and valiant when it is inspired by this Christ who knew how to do more than turn the other cheek, and let himself be nailed to a cross.

He knew the passion for social change, and saw in those who had it the seeds of a calling from God:

This liberation is incomprehensible without the risen Christ, and it's what I want for you, dear sisters and brothers, especially those of you who have such great social awareness and refuse to tolerate the injustices in this country. It's wonderful that God has given you this keen sensibility, and if you have a political calling, then blessed be God! Cultivate it well, and be careful not to lose that vocation. Don't replace that social and political sensitivity with hatred, vengeance, and earthly violence.

He refused, under much pressure, to countenance violent uprising, just as he refused to keep silent and thereby countenance the violence done by the government. Peace for him was a rich and substantive state of being, not passivity, not pacification. "We want peace," Romero said over the radio on October 8, 1978, "but not the peace of violence and of cemeteries, not peace imposed or extorted. We want peace that is the fruit of justice, peace that is the fruit of obedience to God."

And he never lost sight of the fundamental task of the Holy Spirit: to create one holy people, one people who love each other with true, delighted, self-giving love, to present to Christ as his Bride:

There is no longer distinction between Jew and Greek. There is no longer a privileged people and a marginalized people. All of us are coheirs in the mystery of Christ . . . in Christ all human beings are called to this wealth of God's kingdom.

We are members of the same body. . . . God did not make us to live dispersed and separated. We need one another. . . . All the members, each in its proper function, are members of the living body.

Our situation is not Archbishop Romero's—St. Óscar's, I should say; he was canonized two years ago. The situation in El Salvador, the breakdown both of civil order and of basic justice, was worse than what we are experiencing. So much more, then, can we take heart from his words; so much less can we think we have the right to disregard them. I have quoted them because I trust them more than my own, as I trust his wisdom more than my own, and because his gift of words across the decades points to one major aspect of this project:

Now more than ever, ressourcement is crucial: digging deep into Christian memory to find tools and ideas for how to respond to massive disruption and infectious disease, to injustice and the possibility of something like civil war, and how to think about, and build for, what will come after.

Because we can't go back to normal. We shouldn't. If this crisis is a kind of apocalypse, revealing a country that is a tinderbox, ready to burst into flame, we can't simply put the lid back on and pretend nothing happened. We have to build, but we have to build something better than what was here before. We need, at the very least, to try, to sow seeds for a just political economy based, truly, on the common good. We know that nothing good we do will be, finally, lost; and that every sickroom that's the site of honest lament or of the fever that breaks, every hospital that is a barracks against the dominion of death, every outpost of peace and justice and wholeness and friendship that we create is, in some way, part of God's kingdom. And we know that all this is enabled by that Spirit of love who, at Pentecost, revealed himself as flame, and who gave language to the disciples so that the divisions between the nations—and within them—might, finally, be healed. ²⁴²

June 4, 2020

WHAT KIND OF TURNING POINT?

MARK NOLL



WHERE THE VIRUS abounds, so does pontification much more abound. But thankfully so do scraps of genuine expertise, some informed analysis, and a lot of common sense, keeping pace with panic.

Occasional words of wisdom bob to the surface in the oceans of commentary on the Covid-19 virus. Stephen Williams knows something about crises after many teaching trips to Eastern Europe and a long professorial career at the Union Theological College in Belfast. He recently offered the sobering reminder that much of the world's population lives every day with the kind of uncertainties that the lucky few in developed economies are experiencing only now because of the pandemic. (Think of life in eastern Congo; Syria; northern Iraq; refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan; the Rohingya in Bangladesh; Uighurs in western China.)

Another friend, Grant Wacker, was asked by his North Carolina Methodist church to prepare a lecture on the pandemic historically considered. He did so by comparing today's unemployment figures (as bad now as during the Depression, but that decline

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lasted nearly a decade); today's death toll to the toll of earlier pandemics (much, much worse in the Middle Ages from the Black Death and in 1918–19 from Spanish flu); and today's death toll to the toll in America's various wars. (There have so far been more deaths from the Covid-19 virus than American fatalities in World War I; more than American fatalities in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan combined; but far fewer than in the American Civil War.) His conclusion sidestepped pontification entirely: "However the statistics cash out, God reigns; history is in God's hands."

Margaret MacMillan, a distinguished historian of British imperial history at the University of Toronto, has stated succinctly what many others have concluded when they look beyond daily demands: "France in 1789. Russia in 1917. The Europe of the 1930s. The pandemic of 2020. They are all junctures where the river of history changes direction." Surely MacMillan is correct. But where is the river turning, how fast, and in what direction?

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PREDICTION

It is simply impossible to answer such questions with any degree of confidence. Historians routinely disappoint interviewers who ask, "On the basis of your study of *x*, *y*, or *z*, what do you think the future holds?" The mumbled response usually includes something about how difficult it is to understand past events with unambiguous clarity, even with time to pursue documents and sift alternative assessments. How much more challenging to look ahead where there is no documentation and when antithetical predictions proliferate? Still more, because they spend so much time digging up material about past generations, historians know beyond doubt how rarely predictions actually forecast reality.

George W. Bush and Neville Chamberlain compete as prime examples. When Chamberlain returned from Munich in September 1938 to announce "peace for our time," informed opinion agreed that he had dealt successfully with Adolf Hitler. President Franklin Roosevelt spoke for many others in congratulating the British prime minister for this diplomatic triumph. In the moment, Winston Churchill's naysaying only reinforced his reputation for eccentric

willfulness. Somewhat more skepticism greeted President Bush's speech aboard an aircraft carrier on May 1, 2003, with the bold banner in the background proclaiming "Mission Accomplished." Yet it would be months before trickles of doubt about the pacification of Iraq became torrents of dissent.

Misguided confidence in the ability to predict, and thereby control, the future has been perpetual. In the winter and spring of 1989, I was preparing for a summer visit to Romania, where for several years Wheaton College professors had offered courses in theological education for Baptist laymen and women. As part of the preparation, my reading included all I could find on the Soviet sphere of influence in the *New York Times*, *New York Review of Books*, *New Republic*, and several academic journals. Many articles highlighted serious difficulties in the communist bloc; none that I can remember predicted what actually came to pass in the second half of that year. Josef Tson of the Romanian Missionary Society was helping with our preparations; as a lonely voice he spoke with bold assurance about the imminent collapse of the whole Soviet system. Josef was not a figure to challenge directly, but I remember rolling internal eyes at such nonsense because I was informed by those who knew better.

The parade of predictions gone awry is endless. Responsible observers knew that the Continental Army under George Washington was nearing collapse as it huddled at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777–78. The Confederate South exulted in the certainty of independence secured after the first and second battles of Bull Run. In 1922 a Polish visitor to the United States published *Impressions of America*, a book explaining how Woodrow Wilson had brought about a new and better world. Konstany Buszczyński also announced with great relief that "in defeat Germany will once more take its place in the civilized world." The election of Barack Obama in 2008 meant that the nation's long racial trauma was at last coming to an end. The stock market's strength in January 2020 assured a bonus for pensioners' Required Minimum Distributions in 2021. As Woody Allen is supposed to have once said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans."

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