"The Quest For Survival": A Proposal for a World History Framework
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I would like to respond to Professor Theodore Von Laue's recent "Message From the President," in the Fall New England Regional World History Association newsletter by offering a framework that meets his challenge; one that provides a coherent basis for teaching and understanding world history, one that is also highly relevant to today's concerns.

First, his prescription for teaching world history makes a great deal of sense. I agree with his assertion that teachers should interact with students and share their "concerns and uneasefulness" in light of the chaos we witness daily on the evening news and all around us. Students need to know that their teachers are groping, just as they are, to comprehend, cope with, and devise solutions for (at least at some level) the challenges of our time. In an effort to "use the past" to such ends, Von Laue's recommendation that educators "select from the available historical data what is needed for living more effectively in the present" is equally sound. In order to do this, it follows that "relating the past to the present calls for simplification and abstraction." What I offer here is just such an abstraction. While not "universally applicable," it at least makes sense of what otherwise appears as sheer pandemonium. Moreover, I believe my model orders events without neglecting the essential. Von Laue outlined: a complete coverage of human experience; emphasis upon the human skills for self-reliance; the importance of religion; the effects of geography; and other important elements.

The common thread I see running through all of world history is the human quest for survival. At the most basic level, the goal of all living things is survival; this is also true of groups ranging from the family to the tribe, from the nation-state to even the global community as a whole. In providing for the survival of any organized group there are three interrelated components: protection against predators or aggressors; access to material needs and resources; and a high degree of social cohesion. The inability to maintain any one of these components jeopardizes the other two and ultimately negates the goal of the group: survival.

I imagine early humans taking the potentially dangerous step, away from reliance on the individual and/or the family and towards trusting the group, as the most momentous event in human history. It truly was a leap in the dark. However it made sense in terms of survival. In an almost cost plus fashion the pluses outweigh the minuses in terms of the individual quest for survival. The larger the group, the easier it is to have a functioning division of labor and protection against outside aggression. This dynamic of increased reliance upon the group--this enhancement of human survival--represents, at its core, a fundamental choice between "conflict" and "cooperation." Of course, these two choices are opposite poles with a great range of options between them; human interaction takes place along a spectrum of conflict and cooperation.

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"Quest for Survival" (cont.)
Conquest, exploitation, and war belong at the extreme conflict end of this spectrum; mutually beneficial trade, regional alliance systems, and global institutions like the United Nations, are some of the things that make up the cooperation end.

Obviously, not everything fits into this model; but, enough of the important things in world history do. In addition to the phenomena mentioned above, other human activities and endeavors also fit into this survival model. Religion, law, and other human institutions can be seen as essential for insuring a high degree of social cohesion; farming, mining, and the entire gamut of economic and resource development activities contribute rather directly to the group's survival; science and technology are a means for improving the groups ability to both protect itself, and gain and use materials and resources.

A complicating factor in all of this is, of course, the issue of perception. Different groups have conducted their quest for survival in a myriad of ways. In essence, cultural diversity is a matter of the multiple responses to the challenge of survival trusted upon people in all parts of the world at every stage of human history. Customs usually enthrone or institutionalize the various methods of insuring group cohesion--through rituals, myth, legal codes, social arrangements, and so on.

Particular methods of procuring material needs are usually adaptations to specific geographic, climatic, and demographic forces. Methods of protecting the group are usually in response to the actual or perceived intentions of neighboring groups. With the choice between conflict and cooperation occurring on a sliding scale, perception can determine whether the "other" is an enemy or ally, trading partner or competitor. The details involved in terms of such choices, and in terms of the perceptions of various people at various times in human history make up the context and the details of world history.

The survival model offered here is, of course, a rough framework. However, its strength lies in its high degree of explanatory power, and in the fact that it stresses the commonality of human experience throughout time and space while also cultivating a respect for differences: this alone should recommend it as a model for teaching world history. It also focuses on the essential challenge, one that we face today with a vengeance: survival. Today's headlines are filled with news concerning the destruction of our natural environment, global instability and the rapid proliferation of nuclear weapons, overpopulation, civil wars, and a sagging global economy. These and other current problems dramatically jeopardize human survival, in some respects, on an unprecedented scale. Most would agree that a high level of global cooperation is needed in order to prevent disaster; as such, the fundamental choice between conflict and cooperation remains a key to human survival. An understanding of the range of responses made to similar challenges in the past--by a multitude of societies and peoples--can only help us escape the present quandary. Such an understanding can only help us in the ongoing quest for survival.