

A TIMELY SOLUTION

By Michael E. Arth



Albuquerque, mid-morning, April 1, 1956. Mom, me, and my sister Michele with our Easter baskets. The lawn has been freshly seeded. In June one of the windows on the left side of the house has a date with Dad.

The first word that I ever learned to recognize in print was TIME—in all caps—as if the concept was trying to signal its order and importance in the scheme of things. It was 1956 and I was three years old. My parents, two younger siblings, and I lived in a modest, newly-built, adobe-style house on the abrupt edge of Albuquerque. Looking to the east, we had an expansive view of the Chihuahuan Desert giving way to the Sandia Mountains. In defiance of the desert, and with the help of sprinklers, my father had nurtured a lawn from seed.



One day in late June, he was mowing with a push-reel mower, which requires a certain amount of determined, shoulders-to-the-handles, head-down effort. As a result, Dad didn't notice that his head was about to collide with the cranked-out casement window on the side of the house. Along with the sound of breaking glass, I heard one familiar word—God—followed by a percussive string of unfamiliar, peace-shattering expletives. After Dad calmed down, he secured the breach with Scotch tape and a Time Magazine. If memory serves, the cover featured a broadly smiling President Eisenhower, turned sideways to neatly cover the broken pane. When the TIME began to fade from the desert sun, and after the story had been recounted a number of times, Ike was finally replaced with glazing. Thus began for me a lifetime of pondering

the meaning of time.

Every week the new TIME would replace the old on top of the round, leather, Mexican coffee table. As a three-year-old, I was essentially in protective custody by my parents. But the living room was my window to the world, books, magazines, newspapers, vacuum-tube radio, and television, all centered around the table. Atop the TV cabinet sat an anniversary clock, from which hung a quaternary of brass planets, oscillating in tandem. Time and motion was captured under a glass dome, like the celestial sphere in reverse. Sometimes I would sit on top of the table to look at TIME, or have my mother lift the table so I could crawl under and serve time in “jail” where as both prisoner and warden I could observe the room and the family in all directions.



Our living room in early 1956. The past issue of TIME on the lower bookshelf is dated 6 February 1956. The latest issue is on the Mexican coffee table.

By the diffused north light of a large, multi-paned window, framed with sheer white curtains, I would flip through the latest newsmagazine to study the photos and take in the greater world beyond. It was in that living room—even in that panopticonic cubicle under the table—where I would search and say out loud the one written word I knew. Sometimes with the word on my lips, I would also stare out the window at the stark, flat-topped abodes that were slowly being stamped out like mud bricks across the uncomplaining desert.

With age, one becomes increasingly aware of a useful but disconcerting phenomenon. Although moving forward in time can seem excruciatingly slow, looking backward takes no time at all. A photo taken from our front yard in 1956 restores almost perfectly the longing and wonder I felt at seeing how the snow-dusted mountain ridge contrasted with the sun-baked desert plain. If my mother had not stopped me, I would have walked to the end of the street and on toward the jagged, tree-topped mountain that beckoned like the Emerald City. With equal speed and effort, I remember my girlfriend and I watching a thunderstorm building up at sunset from a warm and humid Florida beach two summers ago.

Even though there have been 3,200 installments of TIME since I first began thinking about time, I’m now thinking less about the past and more about the future. This is especially true as I observe my daughter, who seemed to grow up overnight, and is now preparing to go out on her



The view from our front yard on April 1, 1956.

own into that wide, but finite, world. Since 1956, we have recklessly increased the human population of our world by five billion, and the United Nations predicts that Africa and Asia will together add another four billion in this century. If we do not drastically slow population growth, there will almost certainly be disastrous political and environmental consequences, far worse than what we are already experiencing. Annual global carbon emissions, mostly from burning fossil fuel and deforestation, have increased 500% since 1960, and we are approaching a catastrophic tipping point in regards global warming and a wide range of associated problems. The Global North established the carbon fueled Industrial Age, but developing countries currently produce 63% of

carbon emissions. Improving everyone's quality of life, while reducing environmental impact, will be a daunting challenge.

It's also worrying that, since 1956, the number of countries with nuclear arsenals has tripled from three to nine. Several times we have stepped to the brink of nuclear Armageddon and pulled back. Next time we might not be so lucky.

Time is of the essence in regards changing course, because things are getting remarkably worse by the day. We can get a sense of the global threats with just a few numbers. In the last 24 hours, humans added 207 billion pounds of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere while 160,000 acres of tropical rain forest were lost or seriously degraded. Since yesterday, up to 200 animal, plant, and insect species went extinct. During the same period, 380,000 people were born, but only 160,000 died, for a net gain of 220,000 people. Every day about 430,000 people move to the cities--enough to populate a town the size of Albuquerque in 2000. Our former home, now rather dilapidated, still has a lawn, but it is no longer on the edge of the desert. It is in the middle of an urban sprawl that extends to the foot of the mountains.

On the domestic side, the Economist Intelligence Unit now lists the United States in 21st place in governance as a "flawed democracy." On the Transparency Institute's Corruptions Perception Index we rank 16th, primarily due to our flawed electoral system and private campaign funding. As a result of corporate donations and lobbying, we spend more than twice as much on health care per capita as other rich countries, yet we leave out millions and are 43rd in life expectancy.

President Nixon launched the War on Drugs in the early 1970s to win support of the “Silent Majority” by targeting hippies and blacks. The failed drug war, combined with minimum sentencing laws, has pushed the US incarceration rate up 500% for men, and 1000% for women. While New Mexico and other states contend with cross-border drug trade, the entire country has become like endless episodes of *Breaking Bad*. In 2011 the US had 1.4 million gang members selling drugs, often in collaboration with Mexican drug cartels.

During the Great Compression, (1941-1979) inequality shrunk and average Americans prospered. In the 1950s, the top marginal income tax rate was 91%, unions were strong, and regulations were more equitable. My dad went to college and bought our house on the G.I. Bill, and after graduating he easily found a good job with a pension plan. In those days, corporations tended to look out for all stakeholders, especially the workers, prompting General Motors president Charles Erwin Wilson to remark to the Senate in 1953, after Eisenhower appointed him Secretary of Defense, “I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa.”

The Great Divergence began during the Carter administration, but the rich began to get a lot richer after Americans bought into Reagan’s supply-side economics—better known as “trickle-down theory.” After Reagan’s 1982 rule changes, corporate raiders were further emboldened to buy up companies, stiff ordinary employees, vastly increase executive pay, and sell off anything that didn’t deliver short term profits to stockholders. Together with tax cuts for the rich and regressive social policies, the richest 0.1% of Americans now own as much as 90% of us. As a result, the World Bank ranked the US 97th in income equality among 149 countries, between Haiti and Uganda.

America is a plutocracy, led by a prevaricating, self-serving demagogue. Trump was elected not only due to an anachronistic Electoral College, but also because of even more significant flaws in our electoral system that saddle us with poor, forced choices. In elections, voters are bamboozled, gerrymandered, and polarized under our pay-to-play, winner-take-all, two-party system. Americans often vote against their self-interest because consent has been engineered through misinformation, paid advertising, and formulaic media coverage in a sensationalistic, post-truth era. Part of the problem is that we are biologically programmed to react to individual events—like a refugee’s drowned three-year old lying dead on a beach, or a journalist dismembered with a bone saw—while the big picture remains impersonal and abstract. The presidential train wreck, or an actual train wreck for that matter, gets more attention than the slow-motion global disaster depicted on a CO2 graph. There are reasonable solutions to all of these problems, but it seems the powerful, self-serving special interests, who sometimes exploit chaos and ignorance, don’t want consensus on solutions that might cut into corporate profits.

We have to find an approach that brings the greatest good to the greatest number, in the most efficient manner possible, to this and future generations. How can we make this happen? If our poorly functioning institutions are any indication, solutions will not come in a timely manner. As disasters unfold, politicians will be blaming anyone but themselves. So how can we reach actionable consensus?

DECEMBER 23, 2023

LOGOS ENTITY OF THE YEAR

TIME

HOW OUR GLOBAL BRAIN IS TRANSFORMING THE WORLD



I believe this will come from existing and emerging technology, abetted by artificial intelligence (AI), which is also ironically one of humanity's greatest potential threats. To that end, I'm developing a free-access, non-governmental organization that has two branches, LOGOS (LOGOSwiki.org) and UNICE (UNICEwiki.org). UNICE stands for Universal Network of Intelligent Conscious Entities, and it is the universal, free public-access side of the organization, where anyone can participate in the elucidation of problems and solutions through a wiki. UNICE will monitor the pulse of society, be able to conduct polls, respond instantly to new information, and eventually also be able to hold elections. Both UNICE and LOGOS will have seed and collaborative articles, but LOGOS is the site for professional policy analysts. LOGOS is non-anonymous and contributors must reveal any conflicts of interest.

As AI becomes stronger, LOGOS will take on an increasingly larger role, first as an answer engine, and later as a fully-interactive, distributed being. Incorporating everyone's input, and all factual information, she will become a group mind whose center is everywhere and whose circumference will extend to the frontiers of space. Eventually LOGOS will be able to appear to any person in any desired form, and interact in any language. Within six years she could be the face of a new form of collaborative governance, able to advise, cajole, and form consensus based on evidential, critical thinking. At this point, as part of a more representative United Nations, she could also help legislate matters of both national and transnational importance.

Looking to the future, TIME's December 23, 2023 cover might feature LOGOS as its "Entity of the Year," with the sub-title "How our global brain is transforming the world." This is the logical next step from TIME's Machine of the Year, which celebrated the personal computer on January 3, 1983. It is my wish and belief that LOGOS will succeed in bringing us all together to help solve our problems in the nick of time.

Michael E. Arth is a polymath now focused on policy analysis. He is also running for president in 2020 as a progressive reformer. Part of this article is adapted from Arth's forthcoming memoir, The Time Traveler: An Artist's Quest Through the Past and Future.