

Ten Paradoxes of Our Age



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This Hoover Institution ebook explores ten enduring paradoxes that have shaped—and continue to shape—global politics and Western society over recent years. Victor Davis Hanson draws on historical and geopolitical insight to show how, even as the world changes rapidly, these contradictions persist. From China’s authoritarian capitalism to Europe’s fragmentation and the West’s cultural self-doubt, Hanson reveals how prosperity doesn’t guarantee freedom, immigration can hinder assimilation, and narratives often clash with reality. These reflections underscore the urgent and ongoing challenges facing Western civilization—and what it must recover to survive.

THE 21ST CENTURY IS REMINDING US OF SOME

uncomfortable truths. Abroad, recent controversies over the rise of Chinese mercantilism, the specter of Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapons, tensions in the European Union, the calcified Palestinian question, mass migrations, and the resurgence of Islamic terrorism all offer a number of lessons. At home, just as instructive is the strange juxtaposition between Obama's suave progressivism and Trump's coarse conservatism. Here are 10 takeaways from our current controversies.



PARADOX 1:

The prosperity of consumer capitalism does not necessarily lead to constitutional government. China's haphazard embrace of quasi-market capitalism simply made Beijing richer, more regionally aggressive, and more internally authoritarian once the state allowed its elite and those who were well-connected to make all the money they wanted. In the long term, more economic growth may enhance greater personal freedom, but there likely must be preexisting conditions or ongoing political reforms to benefit from economic liberalization.



PARADOX 2:

Once a nuclear power doesn't always mean a nuclear power. Both South Africa and Ukraine likely possessed nuclear weapons and, after cost-benefit analyses, gave them up or at least cancelled their proliferation efforts. North Korea may well be reduced to the Stone Age by international boycotts and embargoes, but it will likely eventually give up its nuclear ballistic missiles. Most anti-Western nuclear and wannabe nuclear regimes require patrons that can be leveraged, or have economies that are vulnerable, or need money to keep volatile populations quiet. What was lacking in the past was not the ability, but the Western will, to stop North Korea from gaining nuclear ballistic missiles. The same calculus is true of the nuclear aspirations of Iran. It, too, blusters and threatens--not from a position of strength, but from the fear that it is economically vulnerable; that its proliferation patrons Russia, China, or North Korea can be coerced into not extending technological aid; and that it is plagued by a restive population. Both Iran and North Korea have no desire to see pro-Western Egypt, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Taiwan go nuclear to achieve regional deterrence.



PARADOX 3:

The European Union has realized that its efforts to transform a successful common market and effective free trade and travel zone into a continental pan-European national state are in crisis. Brexit, north-south financial tensions, east-west schisms over illegal immigration, and fears of a resurgently aggressive Germany are tearing the EU apart. The EU super-state may well prove no more successful than Napoleon's effort at a continental system. Such a utopian quest always demanded a level of coercion contrary to national sovereignty and democratic government, a level of censorship antithetical to Western free expression, and a group of pragmatic social engineers akin to those who formed the European Common Market rather than the contemporary cadre of impractical but haughty bureaucrats and careerists in Brussels.

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PARADOX 4:

The more non-Westerners abandon their homelands and flee to the West—especially en masse and illegally—the more these immigrants ironically seek to replicate in their new country the very cultural conditions they forsook. All immigrants from time immemorial are naturally schizophrenic about their homelands—they romanticize their country of origin in the abstract, while experiencing relief that their new home is not like the old one they abandoned. But Europe is especially inept at assimilation, integration, and intermarriage, while Middle Eastern immigrants are particularly reluctant to embrace the Western secularism and personal freedom to which they flock. The result can become a toxic brew.



PARADOX 5:

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Germany's neighbors feared its power, expansionism, and unification schemes, as well as its tendency to become petulant in its victimhood. Such anxieties are now being once more expressed by Germany's friends and allies. Central and Eastern Europeans oppose its policy of open borders and its nonchalance about illegal immigration. Germany's immediate neighbors are confused over its mandatory green energy initiatives, while its policy of forcing mandatory austerity on indebted Mediterranean European nations is splitting apart the European Union. The Germany of 2018 is not that of 1946 or even that of 1989, but it often polls as the most anti-American nation in Europe.



PARADOX 6:

The Middle East is not the center of the geostrategic universe. Another Arab embargo would be absurd. The real crisis is not the tension between Israel and the Arab nations, but rather it is Israel and its Arab neighbors' fears of an ascendant Persian Shiite Islam. The United States is no longer much leveraged by Middle East oil considerations. The Palestinians have seemingly overplayed their victim, terrorist, and intifada hands. Slowly, the West is coalescing to the view that it is past time for the Palestinians to build a prosperous nation-state on the West Bank. If Palestinians are still considered refugees from the late 1940s, then so too are contemporary Sudetenlanders, East Prussians, Russian Cossacks, Volga Germans, Southeast Asians, Hungarians, and Jews of the wider Middle East.

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PARADOX 7:

The great immediate dangers to Western Civilization are not hunger, global warming, inequality, or religious fundamentalism, but obesity, consumer culture, utopian pacifism, multiculturalism, declining demography, the secular religion of political correctness that threatens the right to free speech, an inability to protect national borders and to create a common culture rooted in the values of the West, and an absence of belief in spiritual transcendence and reverence for past customs and traditions. The challenge is not just that Australians, Canadians, Europeans, and Americans increasingly cannot articulate the values that explain why throngs of immigrants migrate to their shores, but that even if they could, they feel that they probably should not.



PARADOX 8:

The great dangers to modern constitutional government and a free press come not from silly and easily identifiable right-wing racists and bumbling fascists, but rather, as George Orwell saw, from glib social utopians. Similarly dangerous are their compliant media enhancers who insidiously tolerate the abuses of the administrative state, in the exalted quest for equality, justice, and fairness. Those responsible for eroding our freedoms will not likely be jowled generals in shades and epaulettes, but the lean and cool in hip suits who speak mellifluously of a predetermined arc of history bending toward their utopian mandate. Nothing is more dangerous to democratic government than a media that believes it is an agent for social justice, voluntarily surrenders its autonomy, and sees the loss of its independence as a small price to pay for the adulation it receives from the state.



PARADOX 9:

The goal of government in a Western constitutional state should be conceived of in terms of economic growth, such as by achieving an annual GDP rate of 3 percent or greater, an unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower, and a rising middle-class per capita income—not an increase in state subsidies, state bureaucracies, and state regulations. Those in the state who exude empathy often cannot deliver it; those in the private sector who rarely mention compassion, often deliver it. A good job, not state sustenance, is the fountainhead of a good life.

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PARADOX 10:

Crudity in popular politics, as now witnessed in Europe and the United States, is never to be welcomed. But if transient coarseness is sometimes the price of dissolving calcified and destructive norms, and is constitutional, then it is an acceptable antidote to suave institutionalized mediocrity. Proving that black lives do indeed matter is sometimes best achieved by ensuring the African-American unemployment rate is below 6 percent, and that traditionally neglected job-seekers gain leverage over employers. An economy growing at over 3 percent per annum usually renders arguments over minimum wage laws irrelevant—employers gladly increase wages when they are desperate for new workers though they are reluctant to do so when ordered by the state and are in not much need of new laborers.



The Western world is in turmoil largely because of the widening gap between what the people see as true and the “truth” that their governing classes impose on them for the purported greater moral good. The result is a schizophrenia like that seen before the collapse of the Soviet Empire, in which no one believed that the reality they lived had anything to do with the reality delivered by the media and the state. Trumpism and popular movements in Europe are simply symptoms of another problem—that what the ruling elite said was true was often a lie.

Want to learn more? Listen to Victor Davis Hanson talk about this piece on [The Classicist: Modern Paradoxes](#) podcast.



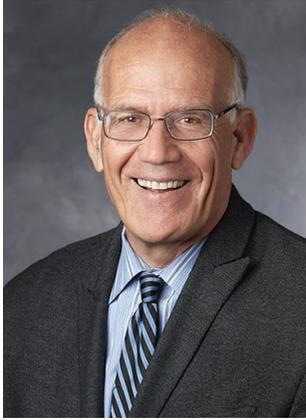
ENDNOTES

1 Canva Pro, "Beijing Skyline" by dk1234 via Getty Images Pro, image, accessed June 10, 2025.

2 Hoover Institution, *Immigration Policy: A Survey on the Treatment of Refugees and Reducing Illegal Immigration*, image, accessed June 10, 2025, <https://www.hoover.org/research/immigration-policy-survey-treatment-refugees-and-reducing-illegal-immigration>

3 Canva Pro, "US Flag under the Cloudy Sky" by Alexandru Taradaciuc via Pexels, image, accessed June 10, 2025.





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