

Pulitzer Center

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The Case for Hope in a Gloomy Time

The world is in better shape than you probably think.

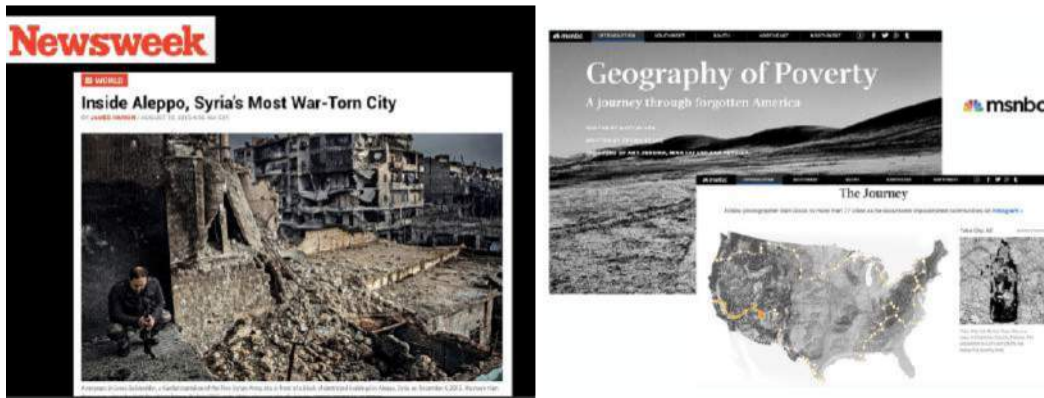
I realize that’s a debatable point. The economy is weak, the cable news channels are full of Benghazi and Donald Trump, our society feels more racially divided than ever, China and Russia are rattling sabers, and President Obama’s critics say he is playing Neville Chamberlain to a nuclear Hitler in Iran.

My optimism might also surprise those of you who follow the Pulitzer Center, the non-profit news organization that I’ve led for the past ten years. We’re in the business of crisis, after all, providing grants to journalists and working with leading news outlets to assure coverage of under-reported systemic global issues—and if you follow our reporting I know that it can sometimes feel like a heavy steady load of gloom and doom, from religious strife to wars and pestilence and environmental catastrophes around the corner.



We've done multiple projects on the exploitation of child labor in gold mines around the world (among them Larry Price's work for *PBS NewsHour* from the Philippines that just won an Emmy for best investigative reporting); on discrimination against women and girls; on the absence of basic sanitation and access to clean water; on sexual violence; and the extraordinarily rapid destruction of fisheries as the result of ocean acidification caused by climate change.

We just did a cover story for *Newsweek* on the disintegration of Syria. Earlier this summer we began a series for *PBS NewsHour* on America's \$100 billion gamble on a new generation of new nuclear weapons.



We've done half a dozen projects on the Ebola crisis in west Africa, including an eBook with *Newsweek* on the world's callous failure to pay front-line health workers in Sierra Leone and a full-length documentary of the struggles of one Liberian village that we previewed last week at the World Health Summit in Berlin. Over the past three months we've worked with MSNBC and photographer Matt Black on a haunting series of essays from around the United States, documenting the many communities where the number of people living in poverty still exceeds 20 percent.



You'll find this sort of coverage in the dozens of print and broadcast outlets that feature our work.

But wait.

I want to talk today about context, about where we are and where we've been, and how in so many ways the world has made remarkable gains. I want to talk about our work at schools and universities, and how our

encounters with young people give us so much hope about the way ahead.

I'm going to draw on my own reporting and travels over the years, on the work that so many Pulitzer Center grantees have done and, most important, on the experiences you yourselves have lived, as the witnesses of and often participants in the changes I want to describe.



You'll recognize these photographs—the Blitz in London and Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. Some of you were old enough to have followed these events as they happened. Some of you no doubt got drawn into the war yourselves and I'm sure that all of you have family or friends who fell. I wasn't born until 1952 so I can only imagine what it

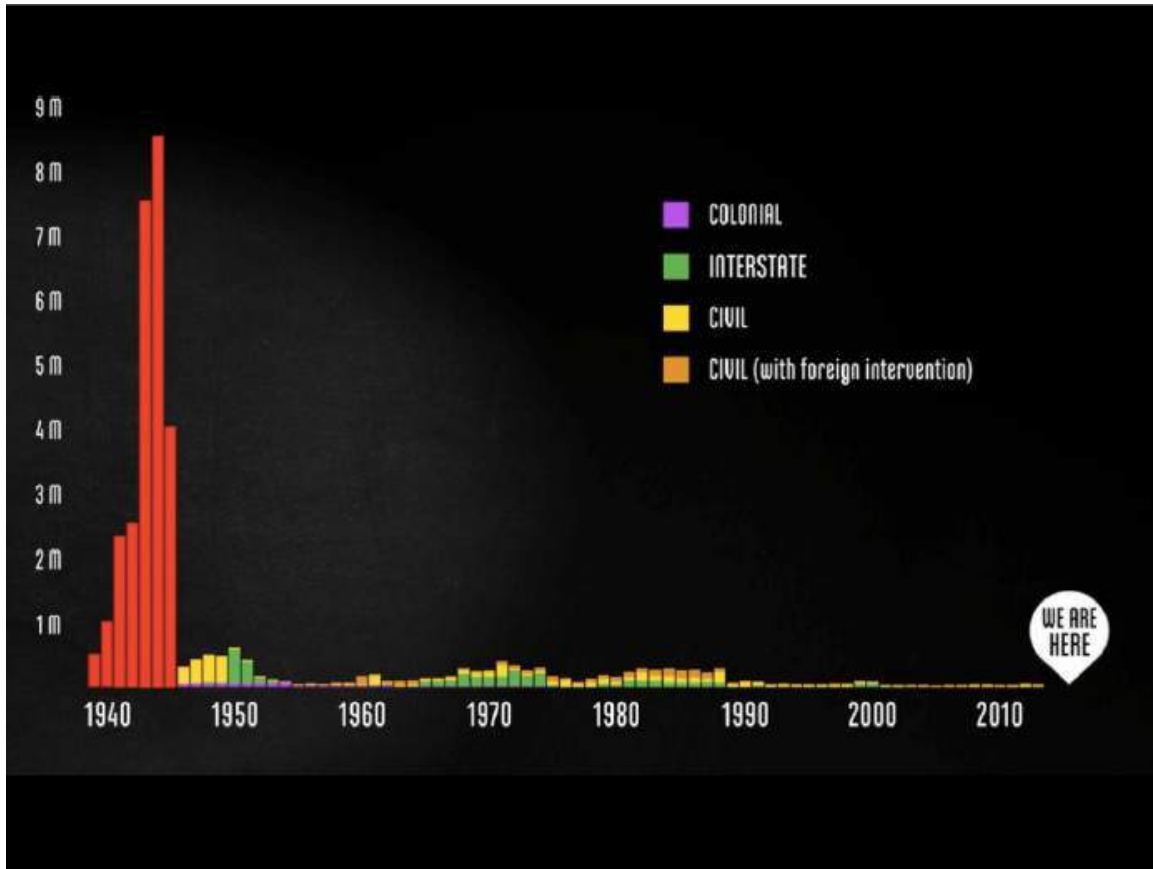
must have been like to follow these events in real time, the enormity of the challenges faced and the unspeakable sacrifices made.

There were 60,000 British citizens killed by Germans during the Blitz. The fire bombings of Dresden, Berlin and other German cities by allied forces took 600,000 civilian lives. Hundreds of thousands more died in the aerial attacks on Japan. In a single battle, Stalingrad, the German army suffered half a million military deaths. For the victorious Soviet forces the costs were even higher: *They lost a million men at Stalingrad*. All told there were 22 million soldiers who died during that six-year period. The civilian toll was 48 million. *70 million dead in total*.

We revere the sacrifice and service of this “greatest generation” who fought World War II but I revere as well the leaders since, the people who have largely kept the peace, who have spared us all a reprise of that unspeakable carnage and wanton destruction.

Earlier this summer the graphic designer Neil Halloran created a remarkable video and interactive graphic called fallen.io/ww2 that captures the scale of the killing in World War II and how it compares to conflicts before and since. He notes that nearly as many American servicemen died on a single day, D-Day, as in the 13 years of our war in Afghanistan — and that by any measure, absolute numbers or comparative portions of population, the deaths in World War II dwarf anything before or since. Halloran concludes by saying that if watching the news doesn't make you feel

hopeful about the world then perhaps looking at these numbers might.



The Middle East remains a mess, yes, a tragedy. We've done seven reporting projects on Syria alone, and have just published an ebook highlighting reporting on that conflict that we've commissioned for NPR, *The New York Times*, and other

news-media outlets. ISIS, the Islamic State, is a singularly brutal phenomenon. We have done reporting on the persecution of the Yazidi religious minority, how ISIS overran their settlements and took hundreds of

young girls and now openly boast of having made them sex slaves. We've seen harrowing accounts of bright young Americans and Europeans drawn inexplicably



to the ISIS cause and this summer the beheading of the archeologist who had devoted his life to the ancient splendors of Palmyra, a place I visited in 2003 and that is now in process of being systematically destroyed. Israel and the Palestinian territories are in another spiral of violence, an issue we are currently attempting to address through a series of video portraits for *The New York Times* on mixed Israeli-Palestinian families who are struggling against great odds to bridge that divide.

And now we have Russia asserting itself in a way that we haven't seen since before the collapse of the Soviet Union—first in its brazen occupation of the Crimea and chunks of eastern Ukraine and now in the military operations it has undertaken in direct support of Bashar al Assad in Syria. We've done multiple projects on the Ukraine and on Russia President Vladimir Putin's increasingly autocratic rule. I would caution you against concluding that what we are seeing today represents a radical break from the past, however, because in many ways this is Russia reflecting its past—not just its past as the Soviet Union but the Russian empire of centuries before. It is also a Russia acting more from weakness than from strength.

Our senior advisor at the Pulitzer Center is Marvin Kalb, the long-time correspondent for CBS and NBC who went on to be the founding director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School. He is a daily treasure on our staff, someone who can relate what is happening today to crises past—and when he brings up the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 he speaks with the confidence of someone who reported that event live and up close, as the CBS correspondent in Moscow.

He has just published his 14th book, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine and the New Cold War*, and in it he makes a convincing case that Putin's actions in Ukraine reflect long-standing Russian assumptions about the “near abroad,” especially the Slavic regions of Ukraine at the ancient heart of Russia itself. He suggests that our own overreach, especially in the 1990s extension of NATO farther and farther east and more recently our strong support for pro-Western factions in Kiev, strongly influenced Putin's move to reclaim what most Russians believe is rightfully there. I saw the depths of those feelings myself, reporting from Kiev, Crimea and Russia two decades ago, just after Ukraine declared its independence. Most Russians, including the ethnic Russians who make up a majority of Crimea, didn't buy the idea of a Ukraine separate from Russia. Most still don't.

Putin's surprise military intervention in Syria, shoring up the Assad regime, is another recent development where context helps. Syria is a long-time Russian client state, with strategically important Mediterranean ports. It is also ground zero, just now, of a vicious strain of Islamist extremism that is attracting recruits from around the world, recruits who at some point may take their extremism home. Recall that Putin rose to power as the man who waged a bloody suppression of Islamists in Chechnya—and that approximately one in seven Russian citizens is Muslim. In that context, Marvin Kalb and others have suggested, Putin's actions in Syria may be less about reckless imperialism and more about defending a vulnerable homeland. In a

CBS interview a few weeks ago Putin said the “most important” reason Russia was combatting extremists in Syria was the “threat of their return to us.” He said that “we are better off helping Assad fight them on Syrian territory.” Not so different, Marvin notes, from one of George W. Bush’s justifications for the war in Iraq—that “we are fighting them there so we don’t have to fight them here.”

On the Middle East I am more optimistic than many analysts, including my friend Marvin, in part because I think Russia’s intervention might actually trigger the brokered settlement that is likely the only workable end for Syria’s carnage. That’s going to require the participation of all concerned, not just our allies but also the Russians and the Iranians. And on Iran I believe the new nuclear accord is another hopeful development—at the least a 15-year pause in Iran’s march toward a bomb and the opportunity over that time for the U.S. and Europe to engage with an Iranian population that clearly wants an end to decades of isolation. I had the opportunity to travel in Iran ten years ago and found young people there amazingly attuned to western culture and trends, intensely proud of their country’s rich culture and history but for the most part unsupportive of the aging ayatollahs clinging to power.

We’ve heard a lot of angry rhetoric about Iran in the last few weeks. In the end I think people listened to the wise counsel of leaders like Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to Gerald Ford and the first George Bush.

“Let us be clear,” Scowcroft wrote in the *Washington Post* after the deal was announced. “There is no credible alternative were Congress to prevent U.S. participation in the nuclear deal. If we walk away, we walk away alone. The world’s leading powers worked together effectively because of U.S. leadership. To turn our back on this accomplishment would be an abdication of the United States’ unique role and responsibility, incurring justified dismay among our allies and friends. We would lose all leverage over Iran’s nuclear activities. The international sanctions regime would dissolve. And no member of Congress should be under the illusion that another U.S. invasion of the Middle East would be helpful.”

Some of you may recall that Brent Scowcroft had similarly wise counsel, a decade ago, when he urged the second George Bush to stay out of a war with Iraq. I was in the Middle East at the time, traveling in Iraq itself and in all the surrounding countries. I met plenty of people who were opposed to Saddam Hussein but barely a single person who thought that U.S. military intervention would be anything other than a disaster—for Iraq, for the region, for the United States, and for the world.

I think the past 12 years has vindicated those concerns. I’m grateful that on Iran we have found a way thus far to talk, not fight, and that we have reached an agreement that has won the support of Russia, China, England and France as well as the United States and Iran.

Russia and China of course are subjects of concern themselves, Russia for its brazen annex of Crimea and attacks elsewhere in Ukraine and China for flexing its growing

military muscle and its threat to America's long primacy in East Asia. Both countries flout basic human rights.

But we must not forget that Russia is a country in decline, dependent on oil revenues at a time when oil prices are plummeting. It is a far cry from the depths of the Cold War, when nuclear war was an immediate possibility and when half of Europe and many countries beyond were under Soviet domination. One of the saddest places Kem and I ever visited was Prague, in 1981, and I vividly recall the pall of life in Cuba in 1979 or Romania 10 years later. Those places and many more were places of totalitarian terror; there are far fewer of them in the world of today.

China I'll come back to in a moment, to discuss our current projects there, but for now I'll point out that China's economic rise is a miracle we should all applaud, for lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty—and that in military terms its spending remains a fraction of our own. China currently spends a little more than two percent of its GDP on the military, which is the amount NATO recommends that each of its member states should spend. In the United States, by contrast, military spending is still over 3 percent of GDP.



Let me turn now to global health, like conflict an area where the gains have been remarkable. When I was in high school, back in the late 1960s, the Stanford academic Paul Ehrlich had just published "The Population Bomb," a Malthusian dystopia about the world's

inability to sustain ever-increasing population. It was an enormous best seller and the focus of public policy debates, with Ehrlich predicting that the world was unlikely to survive another 15 years. Today, 45 years later, we are supporting twice the population of 1968 (7 billion plus as opposed to 3.5 billion). And thanks to spectacular breakthroughs like the Green Revolution we are growing more, and more efficiently and productively, than anyone would have predicted in the 1960s. We just did a project with the Retro Report for *The New York Times*, recalling the grim prognoses from that time and all the progress since.

Last year we worked with UNICEF to create an interactive data map, *Child Lives*, that shows, country by country, just how remarkable the public-health gains have been. Since 1990 alone, according to UNICEF, 90 million lives have been saved thanks to gains in neonatal care, reductions in preventable infectious diseases, and other breakthroughs. The under-five mortality rate in China has dropped an astonishing 74 percent over that period; in India, 56 percent.

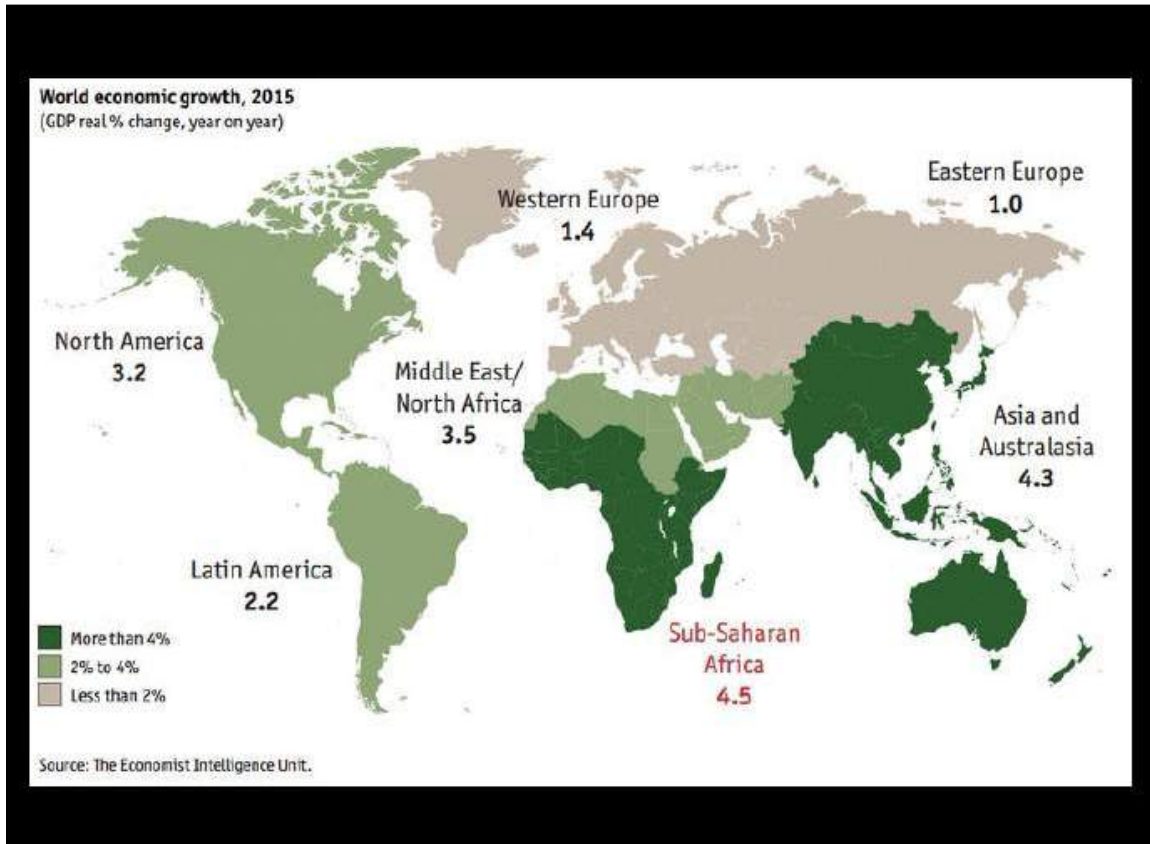


In our reporting projects we have documented the near-eradication of polio and the distribution of anti-retroviral treatments for HIV-AIDS that has allowed tens of millions of people to live normal, healthy lives. Jimmy Carter, in that poignant press conference this summer announcing his cancer, noted the Carter Center's long work toward ending the scourge of guinea worm, a disabling disease that afflicted as many as 3.5 million people each year in the 1980s. By last year the number worldwide was 186.

President Carter told the news conference that was still too many. "I hope the last guinea worm dies before I do," he said.

The public-health gains have been especially dramatic in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is partly thanks to those gains—and because of increased access to education and opportunities for women—that we are finally seeing real economic growth in a part

of the world that has long lagged behind. World Bank projections for likely GDP growth this year, representing a continuation of recent trends, project real growth of 4.5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa this year, compared to 4.3 percent for Asia, 3.2 percent for North America, and 1.4 percent for western Europe. That's correct: Sub-Saharan Africa now constitutes the fastest-growing economic region in the world. That's good news for the 500 million people of the region—and for all of us.



Two of our journalists reporting from Africa were so disturbed by the gap between perceptions and the reality of Africa that they started a project called *EverydayAfrica*, documenting via photographs everyday life from across Africa. It includes photographs from across the continent and has attracted tens of thousands of followers on Instagram, Facebook and other social media sites. It has also become the basis of an educational outreach initiative in dozens of our partner schools, including a partnership between the Nicholas Senn High School in inner city Chicago and the Aga Kahn Academy in Mombasa, Kenya. It's so inspiring to watch these students learn from each other, and break through mutual misunderstandings.

The Pulitzer Center's core mission is international journalism and that continues to be a major part of our work, with over 100 reporting projects each year and hundreds of placements in print and broadcast outlets. But we view journalism as the means to a larger end—engaging the largest possible public in the big global issues that affect us all—and in that regard our partnerships with universities and

secondary schools are an absolutely crucial part of our work overall.

We've recently introduced **online curricular materials such as the Lesson Builder**, a web tool for teachers that makes it quick and easy to identify stories suitable for educational use and then create an outline and questions that can be printed out or shared with students online. Teachers can follow each others' lesson plans and adapt them as they desire—and in the meantime help us foster a community of teachers and students worldwide who are learning via Pulitzer Center resources.



I want to turn now to an initiative on China that has occupied Pulitzer Center over the past two years. We have commissioned multiple reporting projects in China, many of them touching on the immense environmental challenges that have developed in tandem with China's breakneck growth.

Kem and I didn't make our first trip there until 1997, well after the beginning of economic reforms, but even then the streets of Beijing were still a sea of bicycles and getting around the rest of the country was an exhausting slog of hard-seat trains, rutted roads, and everywhere grinding poverty. Today? In so many ways they've leapfrogged us — from high-speed trains to lifting millions out of poverty to health care. It's worth noting, and remarkable, that in those *Child Lives* statistics I cited earlier China alone accounts for some 70 percent of the improvements achieved worldwide since 1990—and that it accomplished those gains largely in the absence of World Bank or foundation or other forms of foreign aid.

But those economic gains have come at a price, in bad air and unsafe food and water, endemic corruption and unregulated construction and industrial activities such as led to the collapse of schools in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 or this summer's chemical explosions in the city of Tianjin near Beijing. In recent years there have been some 50,000 protests *per year* in China. This spring a former CCTV television anchor released an Al Gore-style documentary, "Under the Dome," decrying China's abysmal record on environmental issues. The video was downloaded over 100 million times in less than a week and then was abruptly yanked from the Chinese web.

But the fact that the documentary was produced at all, and that so many Chinese have been emboldened to public protest, is testament to real change. And the government is beginning to respond. Five years ago the statistics on particulate air pollution were a semi state secret, circulated by Internet social media thanks to monitors installed on the roof of the U.S. embassy. Today top Chinese officials cite the bad numbers themselves, along with their determination to reverse past trends and clean up China's environment. Last fall Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a

landmark agreement with President Obama, committing to major reductions in carbon footprint by the year 2030. The two leaders redoubled their commitments when they met in Washington last month, with Xi committing to a market-based cap-and-trade system on carbon emission controls.

Xi and other Chinese leaders are also talking at length about what they call “Ecological Civilization,” how in their view China will meet its environmental challenges by calling on China’s own cultural traditions, among them Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.



It’s worth pausing a moment to consider how startling change this is, in a country that remains officially atheist and that for decades actively suppressed Confucianism as well as all forms of organized religion. The pagoda we’ve been looking at is a magnificent structure from the 5th Century, in the central China province of Henan. It’s located just a few miles from the Shaolin Temple, one of the

birthplaces of Buddhism in China and also central to the development of Confucianism, Daoism and Kung Fu. I was there two falls ago for a conference that marked the establishment of the International Confucian Ecological Association.

I was at the conference partly because of an initiative we had begun with help from the Henry Luce Foundation, exploring issues related to religion and public policy around the world. The goal was to produce journalism but at the same draw on the expertise of academic specialists. We decided to pursue an exploration of religion and environment in China, working in tandem with the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Later that fall I was at a festival for environmental documentary makers in Guanzhou and while there met one of the leading investigative environmental journalists in China. I was surprised to learn that this man had converted to Tibetan Buddhism himself and that it had become central to his own life and work. We then produced a documentary, “Searching for Sacred Mountain,” that captured the drama of his story and also the growing role of religious groups in meeting China’s environmental challenges. The film was featured on PBS *NewsHour* and other programs last fall and was also presented at events we organized at the University of Chicago, at Yale, and at the DC Environmental Film Festival.

But our goal all along was to take this discussion to China and this past June we did

just that, working in partnership with the Yale Center Beijing and the Communication University of China. The daylong conference brought together a remarkable range of individuals: academic specialists, environmentalists, journalists from China and the West, business leaders, the master monk from Qixia Temple in Nanjing, and the deputy director general of the Ministry of Environmental Protection. I was stunned by the candor of all concerned, by the encouragement from the government for this sort of discussion and the willingness of Chinese academics and journalists to press for stronger government action.



bit.ly/EbookBlog



A few weeks ago we published excerpts from the transcript of that conference, along with some of our China reporting, in *Ecological Civilization*, an e-book that we are distributing free of charge via Amazon, iBooks and as a direct download from our website, at pulitzercenter.org. We've also created online educational curriculum based on this material and will distribute that along with other reporting that we're doing on this theme of religion and power—not least reporting that we commissioned in Peru to explore the repercussions of Pope Francis's historic encyclical on the environment and climate change in his home region of Latin America. The journalist on that project, by the way, was Justin Catanoso, the director of journalism at Wake Forest University, one of the 23 colleges and universities that are members of our Campus Consortium. Justin's reporting appeared in a number of print and broadcast outlets; he also spoke at a conference we helped organized last month at American University, another of our Campus Consortium partners, as Pope

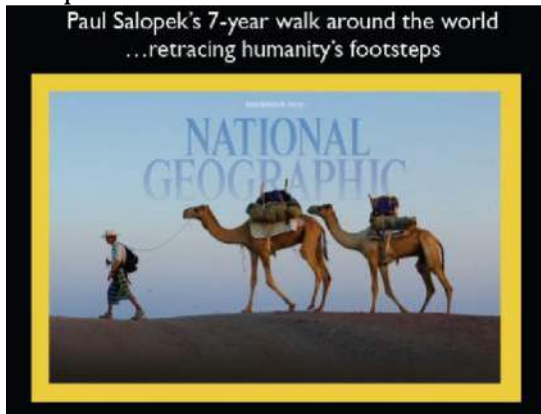
Francis concluded his visit to the United States.



One part of the Campus Consortium program that we're especially excited about—and the part that Kem helps guide—is the student travel reporting fellowship. This summer we've had nearly 30 undergraduates and graduate students reporting from all over the world. Last weekend we brought them all to Washington to present their work and give them the chance to meet our staff and some of the

professional journalists we support. When you see the idealism and the dedication of these young people, and the challenges they are eager to meet, you cannot but be optimistic about our common future.

I want to close with one last example, another initiative combining journalism and education, this one built around our role as the education partner on Paul Salopek's Out of Eden Walk. Paul is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and National Geographic Fellow who is two-plus years into a seven-year walk around the Earth, beginning in the Rift Valley of Ethiopia and retracing the steps of humankind's migration, across Asia and then down the western spine of North and South America. He is doing it almost entirely by foot, practicing a slow deep journalism that is in direct counterpoint to the nano-seconds of attention in today's media world of tweets and shares and celebrity and surface news.



You may have seen the two cover stories Paul has written for *National Geographic* and the reporting on his project on NPR, *NewsHour* and many other outlets. Our role has been as education partner, beginning nearly three years ago with visits by Paul to several dozen of our partner schools, in advance of the start of his trip, and via Skype and email exchanges since. Our teacher partners have used our Lesson Builder to create curriculum drawing on Paul's project and we are using it to engage students in topics as diverse as climate change to the politics of water.

This summer we launched our most ambitious partnership on this project yet,

incorporating Paul’s walk into the experience of the Boy Scouts’ Philmont Ranch in northern New Mexico. 22,000 scouts and leaders have passed through Philmont this summer, 400 of them arriving each day and then setting off on 7 to 10-day hikes in the wilderness. We produced a short video with Paul that was shown at the opening campfire for each arriving group; every camper carried a “passport” journal that includes an essay from our education director introducing the Out of Eden Walk and urging campers to take time to reflect on their own journeys while at Philmont. If you go to the education tab on our website you’ll find a wonderful short video that we produced, capturing the Philmont campers’ encounter with Paul’s form of “slow” journalism.



I began talking about the importance of context, of looking beyond the headlines of the moment for larger trends. The headlines today are about tens of thousands of refugees, about a wave of global displacement and refugees as big as any since

World War II, crossing the Mediterranean on over-crowded unsafe boats and walking the highways of Europe; about minor children from Central America traveling alone across Mexico toward the United States; about a backlash against immigrants that is building across Europe and in our own country too.



I hope that projects like the Out of Eden Walk help us recall that we have all been on the move, for millennia. That our own

country and others are far richer for the talents and energy that new immigrants have always brought. That it is in the interest of us all to foster political stability and economic growth in the less developed parts of the world—and to facilitate the integration of immigrants who make the journey from south to north.

These are big challenges but they are far from insurmountable. We know that we have met them before, from the miraculous reconstruction of a shattered Europe in 1945 to the stunning agricultural breakthroughs of the Green Revolution and the digital transformations that have knit our world more closely together than ever. What we have witnessed, what we have experienced ourselves in our lives, should give us confidence as to the road ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a bit of our story, and some of the reasons that in these sometimes gloomy times I remain an optimist. I look forward to your questions.