

# A Crisis of Governance

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## Craig S. Barnes

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In the absence of some theme of global interdependence and the absence of any popular politics of community, the prevailing organizing value of our world is economic. This leads to the domination of economic institutions over political ones so that conversations in corporate board rooms and the federal reserve bank may more fundamentally affect our lives than state legislatures or the Congress. It means that profit is more esteemed than fairness or equality or education or long-term sustainability of the food chain. It means that the bottom line of an annual report is more important than its labor policy or its treatment of women or its concern for the preservation of species. No post-Cold-War consensus yet exists, no theme or story yet exists, by which we sing the honor of communal rights, the communal memory, or the exhilaration of common work.

Because, further, we have far fewer ways to affect economic decisions than we do political ones, we are, at the outset of the new century, in a sort of crisis of governance. The common man has no access to corporate board rooms or the federal reserve bank or the oligarchy of any third world country which may decide to denude the Amazon forests or dry up the Aral Sea. We have no recourse nor entry to these conversations. We have archaic procedures to appear in public hearings before the county commissioners or the city council. We can petition the Congress; we can vote; those with lawyers and time can sue in the courts for violation of civil rights or labor rights. But there is no cause of action on behalf of unborn grandchildren, no cause of action on behalf of community; all our suits are on behalf of individuals or corporations. Citizens appearing in county hearings do not affect the federal reserve board or the board of Chevron Oil or decisions to drill on the North Slope or in the Caspian.

In 1787 when the framers of the US Constitution were designing a government, they achieved a balance between individual rights and the rights of the collective and set up a tension between these two so that the one would never completely override the other. Today, there is little residual memory of our one-time allegiance to the common good, the national good, or the international good. The story of the common good has largely been replaced by the story of the individual good.

After the 1930s and the collapse of the international economy in the west, and largely as a result of prohibitively high tariffs, we instituted at the end of WWII a regime of global tariff reductions and free trade. When, further, the United Nations was organized in 1945, all could agree that a collective conversation about global security would be central to our post-war survival. Later, in the midst of the Cold War, it was thought that expansion of nuclear arsenals could kill us all and therefore another treaty regime was instituted, including the Anti Ballistic Missile and the Non-Proliferation treaties. In the 1960s and 1970s we could see that global environmental deterioration affects the whole planet and treaties were again initiated to overcome the temptation to rogue national economic development. All these treaties together led to a sort of international web of collective agreements, supported by a central conversation at the UN and a sense of mutually shared responsibility for the public welfare. This treaty regime was a form of international governance.

Today, as Bill Busse has noted in his contribution to this website and Admiral Carroll has also noted, the US is in the process of systematically rejecting the global treaty regime. We discount the United Nations and do not pay our bills. The Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Kyoto Treaty, the law of the sea, treaties to ban land mines, are all being rejected because they are thought to curb US economic interests. When, according to current thinking, the interests of the smaller corporate group are threatened, the larger community, the global community, may be ignored. The economic movers are not venal. There is no malevolence there. There is no justification to create enemies of the corporate world or its interests. This is simply a competition of values. In this case the economic values of a few are trumping the survival rights and the cultural rights of the many. They are fully sanctioned to do so, since the economic story is the governing story of our age. The treaty regime was, however, a form of limited governance, and since the economic story erodes the treaty regime, we are left not only with a crisis of values, but also with a crisis of governance.

It is consistent that the rest of the world, whether governments or individuals, have little power to affect what our government does, even when we have in the past made our agreements formal, and sanctified them by US Senate ratification. International law holds that treaties are binding, but the US government says that they are not. Critics are twice shielded from effective complaint, once by the US government's resistance to outside input of any kind and second by the obscurity of the corporate process which is itself protected from scrutiny by US law. Any individual's life, anywhere, may be affected, the survival of his or her children may be affected, but he or she is largely powerless to enter the economic conversation at, say, the federal reserve bank or in corporate boardrooms. Grandchildren, at home and abroad, have no representation and no cause of action.

Nor can it be said that the forces for reconciliation, long-term preservation, and communal value are gaining ground. We waft in that no-man's land between stories, socialism discredited and abandoned, compassion unfunded, philanthropy unfocussed because of the absence of story, or theme, or sense of historic collective purpose. It is because of this need to create a common

story, a larger identity encompassing more values than just economic, that we consider reviving the *Breakthrough* conversations again on a global scale.

At one time in the 1920s, a small group of twenty physicists gathered in Moscow to have their pictures taken together. The photograph still hangs in the Institute of Physics in Moscow. These twenty scientists later became the founders and expositors of quantum theory and went on to move the world toward a new paradigm of reality. We seek now, through the web, to create another new interaction of aspiring minds who might change another paradigm. This time, we seek to launch a dream of larger purpose and larger spirit that encompasses the principal of global interdependence and which, in turn, provides justification for responsible, accessible, and identifiable governance.