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## CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF COMPETITION

Accurately predicting the future is extremely difficult. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard identified part of the problem. Although “life must be lived forwards,” he noted, “it must be understood backwards” (Hong & Hong, 1967, vol. 7, p. 450). Nevertheless, we are adept at recognizing trends. As the chapters in this book have shown, current trends suggest that both competition and cooperation will continue to play important roles in the future, though it is less clear which will be dominant.

Events during 2008 provided a glimpse into one of the economic trends that will likely characterize the second decade of the 21st century. The near-paralysis of world capital markets, the rapid devaluation of stocks, and a severe recession throughout many industrialized countries undermined confidence in certain aspects of free-market capitalism. Unrestrained competition, which had been promoted for over three decades as the key to economic growth and innovation, came under intense criticism. Policymakers, elected officials, and citizens began to demand more public supervision and regulation of financial institutions, whether by existing or new government policies and agencies. Greater state involvement, proponents argued, would redefine the acceptable limits of competitive economic behavior. In other words, making Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” more visible would give capitalism a stronger ethical foundation. Even some who supported such interventions lambasted the government “bailouts” that transferred \$700 billion from taxpayers to corporations, illustrating the contentious nature of striking a public-private balance in competitive undertakings.

Competition will also continue to define the struggles between and among adherents to different religious ideologies. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalists view the world in stark terms of *us* versus *them*. They attempt to persuade others that their values and beliefs are the ones worthy of emulation (not unlike U.S. and Soviet propaganda during the Cold War). As these groups compete for support and sympathy, sectarian strife will undoubtedly cause significant suffering and loss of life (witness the decades of upheaval in the Middle East). Even in times of peace, different religious groups can find themselves competing for state resources, protection, and/or recognition, as in India and China. Thus, the degree to which cooperation or competition dominates the future might well depend on how we—individuals, nation states, and the global community—react to religious pluralism.

Competition over non-renewable resources will also present serious challenges. But does that doom us to a world like the one portrayed by Harry Harrison, whose 1966 novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (which became the basis for the popular film *Soylent Green*) depicted a future of bleak and brutalizing privation? Recent history gives us reasons for both hope and concern about the possible accuracy of this vision. At least one military conflict, the Gulf War of 1991, demonstrated that nation states are willing to take drastic steps to both acquire and protect oil supplies; on the other hand, record-high oil prices in 2007 and 2008 renewed serious discussions about ending dependence on fossil fuels. Though less publicized, water shortages are afflicting many regions throughout the world. As noted in chapter 2, water crises have typically elicited cooperation rather than hostility—in fact, water-rights agreements are among the world’s oldest international accords. This should make us feel optimistic about how subsequent conflicts might be resolved. Indeed, many believe that cooperation is the *only* way we can maintain a livable planet. As Meadows, Meadows, Randers, and Behrens (1974) observed more than three decades ago:

We affirm that the global issue of development is ... so closely interlinked with other global issues that an overall strategy must be evolved to attack all major problems, including in particular those of man’s relationship to the environment. (p. 195)

Whether competition can be legislated remains unclear. Lawmakers, however, showed few doubts when they passed the “America Competes Act” (ACA) on August 9, 2007 (121 Stat. 572). Reminiscent of the National Defense Education Act (see chapter 12), this legislation provided additional funding for research, education, and innovation in key fields such as math, science, engineering, and technology. Without providing specifics, these provisions will theoretically allow Americans to compete more effectively with other nations. The degree to which lawmakers will scrutinize the effects of and/or limits to competition in their own sphere of electoral politics is even less certain. With candidates spending record amounts every election cycle, there are increasingly vocal calls for campaign finance reform. Supporters of these reforms argue that current conditions favor candidates with the greatest economic resources, which creates an inherently biased process. This, in turn, underscores a longstanding belief among Americans that competition derives legitimacy from its perceived fairness. Appeals to fairness will likely influence future attempts to regulate competition, everything from additional restrictions on performance enhancing drugs, expansion of school-choice programs, and tariff reductions.

Any consideration of the competition paradigm’s prospects must necessarily raise normative and philosophical issues. Even if a “struggle for existence” is one of the hallmarks of life on Earth (see chapter 1), we cannot ignore the psychological or sociological costs of *how* we confront and shape that struggle. In the early 1960s, the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1962) suggested that electronic technology had created a global village. In the almost 50 years that have elapsed, computers and the internet have greatly affected, both negatively and