

Barbara Tuchman's 'Mankind's Better Moments' (1980)  
Revisited.



*Barbara Tuchman 1912-1989*

In April 1980 Barbara Tuchman, one of the world's most famous and respected historians, gave a lecture entitled 'Mankind's Better Moments' at Washington D.C. This was printed up later that year in *American Scholar* and reprinted in in her *Practicing History: Selected Essays*. 1(1982)

At this time the global mood was dismal. After Russia invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 Russia and the USA seemed to be on a collision course for World War Three – if a war between the USA and Iran over the hostage crisis

did not start first. Presidential candidate Reagan, obviously the future winner, exacerbated the mood with his rhetoric and his electoral “promises”.

Without being specific Tuchman noted the “prevailing pessimism” and how it had become tiresome and one sided. She then gave a broad view of how people had always enjoyed laughter and pleasure, experienced happiness, comfort and love and shown courage, heroism, honour and decency. A zest for liberty had always existed and to illustrate the point she gave examples from the ancient Maccabees to the American Revolution.

Before giving examples Tuchman noted how the motives for mankind’s better moments are not always based in high motivations and that all positives have a negative side. As she said sometimes the negatives end up dominating our outlook – and they should not. Her list of great achievements included:

### *The Zuider Zee*

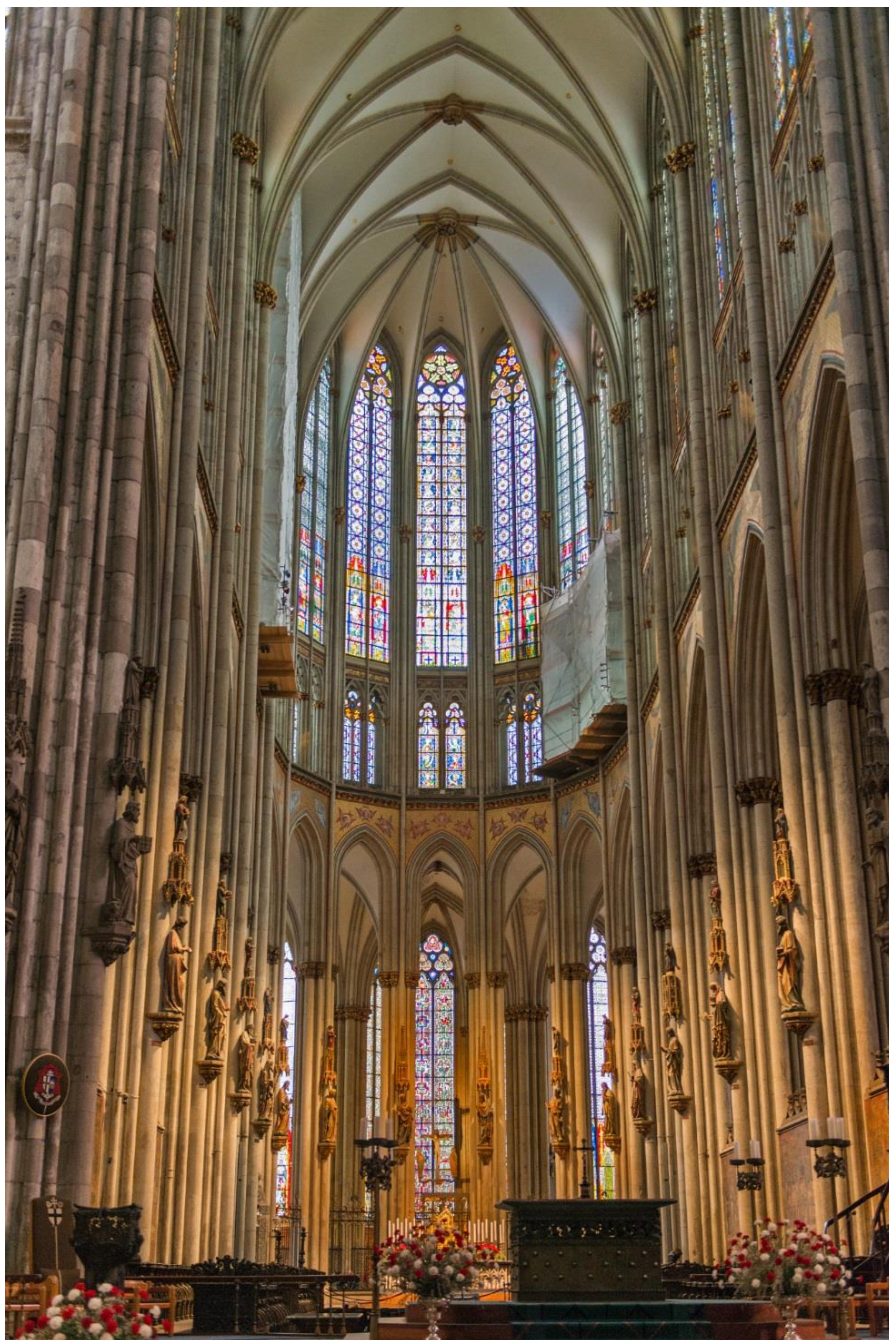
Starting in 1920 and going into the 1970s the Dutch, facing flooding and land loss to the North Sea, reclaimed the land, drained swamps and marshes and eventually added half a million acres to their nation. This provides homes, farms and towns to nearly a quarter of a million people.

### *Woven Baskets and Planted Grain.*

A Great moment? For prehistoric peoples this was. This was solving their energy and food crisis, moving away from being hunter-gatherers to living by planned, more reliable agriculture. If animals are hunted to scarcity hunters starved to death. Advantages with grain are obvious, the woven baskets less so, but they allowed the gleaned grain to be carried to storage areas and transported for trade.

### *Europe's Gothic Cathedrals:*

Instead of war or royal ostentation Medieval people frequently devoted their energies to worshipping God through creating beauty and by doing so left architecture that makes the human heart soar – as their architecture does.



*Cologne Cathedral soars*

*Wikimedia*

### *The American Revolution of 1775–1783.*

Tuchman was aware of the increasingly cynical beliefs about the American Revolution, particularly the idea that the leading revolutionaries were motivated by financial gain. She gave examples amongst the several leaders who actually lost heavily by their stance and mentions some dangers which they faced. The Declaration of Independence expressed a defiant rejection of royalist elitism and a belief that all had tangible rights was a great moment, not just for America, but for the world.

### *Science and Technology.*

Tuchman notes the deadly effects of weaponry as the downside, but imagine surgery without modern technology, diagnoses without x-rays or ultrasounds, hospitals without anaesthetics or antiseptics, disease without antibiotics. Imagine life without electricity. To give one example washing clothes without washing machines took hours and rarely did not do the cleaning effectively: rashes and infections were common. The massive killer disease typhus came from lice living in unwashed or under-washed clothes.

### *The Olympic Games.*

A peaceful way be rivals, to keep fit, enjoy competition and to celebrate.

### *Sport, carnivals, festivals, pageants and fairs.*

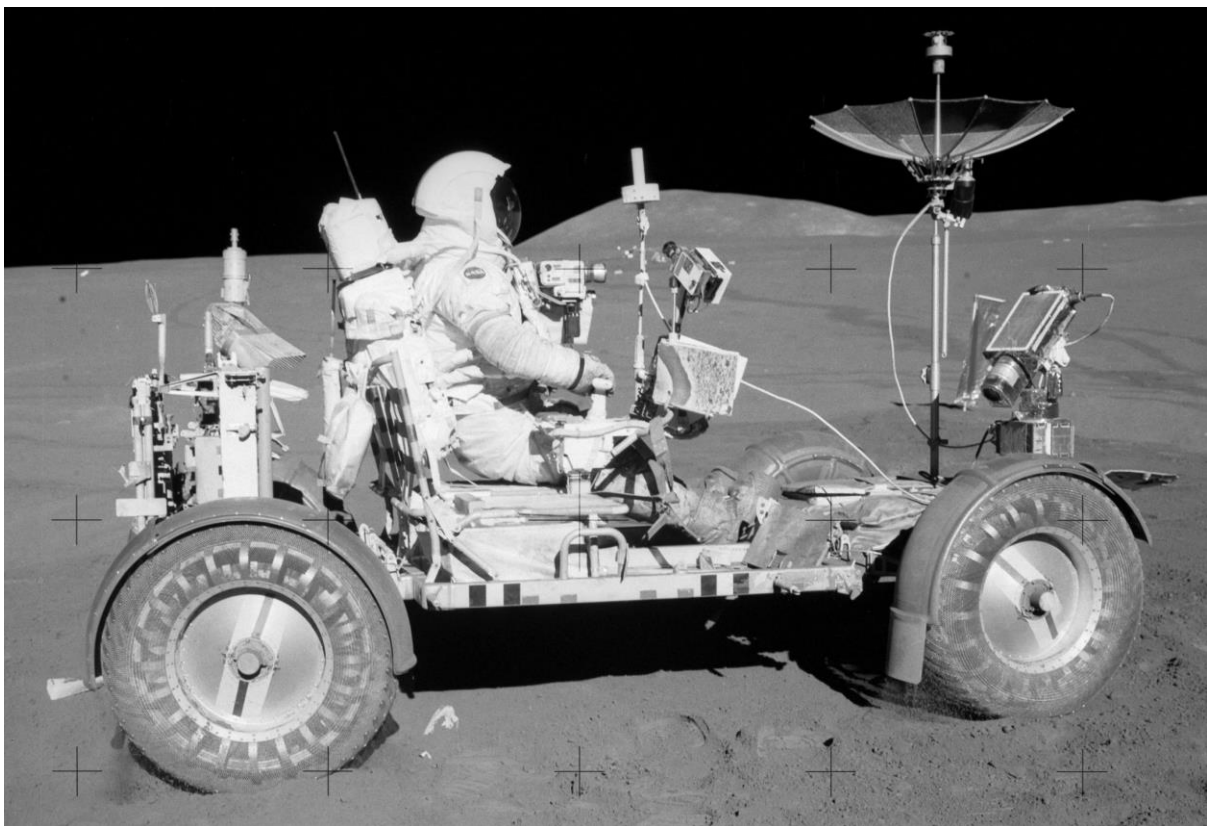
If humans invent weapons they also invent ways to peacefully burn up energy, indulge in harmless fantasy, add variety and colour to their lives and make themselves relaxed, fit, optimistic and happy.

### *Slavery:*

By 1789 New York State, New Jersey and Pennsylvania joined the New England states in abolishing slavery. By 1807 England had ended slave transportation and abolished slavery throughout its empire.

### *Astronauts on the Moon:*

Humans were no longer tied to their planet of origin. A universe awaits.



*Apollo 15 Lunar Buggy in action 1971. Public Domain/Nasa/Wikimedia*

A speech leaves little time to develop examples, but this essay contains more details added to some of Tuchman's examples.

*Slavery:* Like the English, Mexico also abolished slavery in 1833. Russia followed during the period 1856–1863 with Brazil also abolishing in stages starting in 1871. France, Portugal and Spain followed the British Empire's lead and Cuba was amongst the last, ending legal slavery in 1886. It is often argued that in much of the world conditions remained so bad that virtual slavery still existed. Slavery still exists in places and the refugee crisis is giving slavery an odd comeback – and not just in Northern Africa. This time slavery is camouflaged with anti-racist rhetoric and calls to show compassion for suffering refugees by letting them into the western nations. For many the reality is definitely not compassionate. Refugee workers on farms factories domestic service or in sweat shops in supposedly civilized nations such as the USA, Italy, England and Australia work in virtual slavery, fearful of deportation if they complain. The same happens to teenage prostitutes, often kept in cages. In one publicised Australian case a worker paid five dollars an hour, worked ten hours without a break and was then sacked for going to the toilet without permission. However for over a century where it was made illegal people could not be legally lashed or beaten, held without liberty, sold in auctions or branded like cattle or enchained. Their employers can be prosecuted for indulging in such practices. Even in the worst places they could leave, vote, appeal to courts, marry, run for office, earn wages, open bank accounts and own property.

### *The American Revolution of 1775–1783.*

The idea that sanctimonious self-interest, mostly concerned with money, motivated the American Revolution's leaders and many soldiers comes from the perspective that they won and then prospered. Tuchman mentions several who were permanently ruined. Jefferson, while not in poverty, did not die rich, much of his later life was spent dealing with cash problems. Washington was lucky not to have invading British troops plunder his estate and burn the

remainder. Freezing and starving at Valley Forge and Morristown is not getting rich. The risk the rebels took was that their rebellion could get them executed for treason or being dispossessed, whipped and branded and sold into slavery. All these things were likely as they happened to Scotland's Jacobite rebels after their rebellion against British rule was crushed in 1746.



*'The March to Valley Forge' (1883) by William B.T. Trego does not depict a group of sleek investors off to visit the stock exchange. Wikimedia*

Many of mankind's better moments were not mentioned by Barbara Tuchman. Her voice and her audience would have vanished if she tried to give a full list at her lecture: others happened after 1980. Here are a few additions – ponder over others:

### *The Rise of Christianity:*

Christianity tends to be judged by the power it often eventually became. It frequently appears as a repressive, mercenary and hypocritical belief system.

Christian organisations are seen as where the original ideas were commercialised and overlaid with superstition and dogma. However look at the original ideas and contrast these to the world where they first appeared. The Roman Empire was based on slavery and greed, both sustained by conquest. Lands were taken by near genocide, remnants of tribal populations were either enslaved or survived as collaborators. Feeding people to ferocious animals or pitting them against each other or animals in gladiatorial fights were regular entertainments. Taxation was onerous and refusal or failure to pay were punished severely. Slaves could be worked to death. The most extreme poverty existed beside the most extreme wealth. Gross exploitation was more commonplace than amiability.

In contrast Jesus encouraged people to love one another. He called on them to show mercy, not revenge. They should disavow greed, cruelty and ingratitude and to live simply and in harmony. People should take responsibility for their actions and renounce selfishness.

There was something in his message which appealed to the better side of human nature. Starting as a man without wealth or worldly power, holding no position within an established organisation or even having a home and an income, his message would take over the Roman world and then survived its fall. Not all Christians have burned enemies at the stake, conquered indigenous peoples so as to take their land, enriched themselves through chicanery or lived double lives. Throughout the world and throughout the centuries Christians have frequently alleviated poverty, and shown mercy and humility when in powerful positions. Since the days of the Roman Empire they have regularly sheltered the homeless, donated to charities and funded and maintained hospitals and shelters. Many have taken stands against dictatorships and mercenary exploiters, knowing that they risked suffering or even martyrdom for their stance.



### *The Invention of Paper.*

In 1978 Michael H. Hart compiled a list of the one hundred most influential people in history, starting from the most important to the lesser. A generally unknown Chinese eunuch living in the second century AD was listed seventh. He only did one thing to become so influential: he invented paper. Few inventions have been so influential or beneficial. Imagine culture and history without paper, architecture without drawing plans, medicine and disease without prescriptions, courts without records, music without sheet music, communication without letters, science without records, and food without paper derived containers. People who were once like the dead if they moved away could now send news home ... The list is almost endless. What would a world without paper be like?

### *The Invention of the Moveable Type Printing Press.*

Similarly when Johann Gutenberg of Mainz (c1400-1468) developed moveable metal type, (including the alloy that could withstand his press's pressure) and his effective printing press he opened up a knowledge explosion that would remain unequalled until the computer age. There had been printing presses before him, mostly of wood. These gave blurred copies and usually wore out or splintered fairly rapidly. Even metal blocks were rare and at best could print only one book. Moveable type meant that one press could print an infinite number of books. In the Medieval age a collection of a thousand manuscripts and books would have been one of Europe's great collections: after Gutenberg such collections were common and no longer the prerogative of aristocrats and churchmen. Mass production had hit the world of knowledge. Information not only spread but could be shared, built on and therefore developed. Methods of fighting disease could be compared and spread. Oral culture could be preserved. Maps, once treasures, could be

bought by any traveller. Printing Bibles helped reduce the stranglehold of the Catholic Church by putting the knowledge of what the Bible actually said into the minds of common people. This helped fuel the Reformation. Literacy spread with the spread of books. It would be over five hundred years before computers reduced the importance of the printing press.

### *Chinese Fireworks.*

Fireworks were invented in China around the ninth century AD and then developed into rockets, using bamboo. They were used not just for celebrations and magic, but to scare off cavalry attacks from the Mongols: horses and their riders found them terrifying. Although fireworks ingredients could have been used by the Chinese for developing artillery, they seemed content to use them for entertainment and militarily for scare tactics. This surely is civilization. Whenever fireworks are displayed the soaring beauty created makes for another of mankind's better moments.

### *Collecting Shakespeare's Works.*

Because Shakespeare's collected plays are ubiquitous now and performances of his plays were usually popular from their premieres, many people assume that they must have gone into print soon after being written and to have been perennial best-sellers. What happened was very different. His last known play was first performed in 1613 and he died three years later without authorising any printed editions. He may not have taken any scripts into retirement. They may have been burned when his major outlet, the Globe Theatre was burned in 1613. Some plays were published in small editions in his lifetime, but his works would probably have been forgotten except for the selfless work of two friends from the theatrical world, John Heming and Henry Condell. They painstakingly collected most of his plays and published what they had

obtained in 1623 in what became known as *The First Folio*. They did not get everything. *Candensio* remains lost. *Pericles* was added to the collected works in 1634 and may have been a collaborative effort, as *The Two Noble Kinsmen* probably was. Shakespeare may also have written or co-authored *Edward III* (1596). Their editing was not always first class. This was not always their fault: some scripts seemingly originated from plagiarists watching performances. Others existed in multiple interpretations or reworkings and included directions. Misspelling and syntax were also problems. Their *First Folio* would eventually go through corrections and editing and remains a source of debate. Even so, imagine culture without Shakespeare.

*The eradication of smallpox.* Smallpox is the only disease ever to be eradicated by humanity. A global mass killer spreading and infecting over centuries, its toll can only be approximately numbered by many tens of millions. It left survivors physically scarred for life and sometimes blind. Vaccinations began in England in the late eighteenth century and the practice slowly spread. By the beginning of the twentieth century Scandinavia was free of the disease and by 1967 so was Europe, North America, China, Japan and Australia. The World Health Organisation began an eradication program for the rest of the world in 1966, intending to eradicate smallpox within a decade. It took a little longer. Africa, South America and parts of Asia were stubborn areas to conquer, but by 1979 the battle had been won. Ironically the last smallpox death was not in the developing world where it killed tens of millions, but was connected to a smallpox research centre in Birmingham, England in 1978. This last death was that of an English photographer living nearby. Since the 1990s only two samples of the virus exist – in laboratories for study.

### *France 1789:*

Yes we all know that the 1789 French Revolution led to mob killings, the Reign of Terror, Napoleon's dictatorship, much of Europe being devastated by Napoleonic wars and the eventual return of royalty. Yet in this examination of moments there was a glorious early moment. In a world where people were supposed to grovel before royalty, despise those of other nations and faiths and accept being exploited to uphold a world of gross inequality people said no. Instead they came up with an extraordinarily positive slogan "Liberty Equality Fraternity." At the start this was not an aim just for France, but a declared aim of the revolution for the peoples of the world. Many foreigners enthused, initially.

### *1846 Michigan becomes the first government to abolish the death penalty:*

The death penalty was legal in every nation on earth. Frequently executions were a public spectacle until the middle of the nineteenth century. Some nations and kingdoms did not apply it. San Marino has not had an execution since 1468. Lichtenstein since 1785. Iceland since 1830, but legal abolition only began in the 1840s. Michigan's 1846 abolition was soon followed in the early 1850s by Wisconsin and Rhode Island. Oddly the heavily Catholic, now defunct Roman Republic became the first nation to abolish capital punishment, in 1849, when the Catholic Church presiding over the public burning of heretics was still within living memory. Venezuela put capital punishment abolition into its constitution in 1863. Portugal began legislative steps towards abolition in 1852 and finally passed the laws in 1867. Most of the world would wait until well into the twentieth century to see the last legal executions within their nation.

*Lincoln's Second Inaugural and Appomattox.* In his Second Inaugural speech Lincoln's expressed the idea that both sides believed themselves to be doing God's will, This led to his concept that there should be no malicious punishment after the approaching victory came and that that the reunited nation's first task would be to bind the wounds as a way to a just and lasting peace. Thirty six days later at Appomattox in the same spirit Grant gave Lee generous surrender terms. Seeming to sense southern honour, officers were allowed to keep their side arms. He issued rations to Lee's army and rail travel tickets so that they may go home where Confederates would be undisturbed as long as they obeyed the laws of the United States Grant even ordered his artillery to stop firing as he did not want the Confederates to think that his troops were rejoicing at their downfall. In the same spirit when many of his soldiers said they would fight on Lee said he would not be a party to continuing the war and that they should return to their homes and rebuild their lives.

### *The Nobel Prizes.*

Due to a confused report which should have referred to his brother, Swedish multi-millionaire Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) was able to read his obituary where he was denounced as a merchant of death. In another version a mother took him to visit her son. Once handsome, he was left horribly scared and crippled by being a wartime casualty and the mother credited Nobel's invention of dynamite as the cause, telling him to look at what his invention had done. Whichever story is true (or if both are) Nobel became determined to use his fortune for the benefit of humanity. Setting up the funding and the structure took time, but by 1901 the first awards, consisting of a medal a diploma and a cash award were made. The fields were chemistry, literature, peace, physics, physiology and medicine. In 1968 economics was added. In all these fields Nobel's awards have given recognition, respectability and financial

aid. Gaining the award has often aided and encouraged further scientific development in the different fields and work for peace.

### *The 1914 Christmas Truce.*

As the German and English armies faced each other in the trenches of France in December 1914 a totally unexpected thing happened on one part of the front; the ordinary soldiers of both armies stopped fighting and fraternised. Despite all the killing and misery they had inflicted on each other, despite all the propaganda depicting the enemy soldier as a ravening beast, both sides sensed that they were all humans together, caught up in a cruel situation beyond their control. They chatted, shared drinks, exchanged parts of their uniform and posed for photographs – until English officers started an artillery bombardment to end what was developing. German officers matched this with transfers of their fraternising units. In a way enemy officers without meeting had also reached an implied agreement – to keep the war going. Even so, the common soldier had shown and shared humanity against tremendous pressures.

### *The February 1917 Russian Revolution.*

Communist propaganda has taken over the Russian Revolution to the extent that its immediate origins are obscured for many. It did not begin with Bolshevik leaders, most of whom were not within hundreds of kilometres of where the revolution began in Petrograd, with queues of starving civilians, mainly women being tired of the cold, tired of queues and tired of starving and the war and the Czar's tyranny. They were soon joined by factory workers and the ordinary soldiers who refused to fire on them. As the mobs became larger, the officers and politicians could not control the situation. The Czar, already facing a lack of confidence from his ruling class, abdicated within days.

Soldiers began to desert the army, going home. The Russian people began to take over fields factories workshops and transport before Lenin arrived that April and told them to do this. Politicians, generals and revolutionaries would soon arrive on the scene and compete for being Russia's alpha male. Stalin was the ultimate winner. With his henchmen Molotov and Yenukidze, he was actually present in the revolution's first few days, but played no leading part, indeed he was barely noticed. Chaos, crime banditry, starvation, dictatorship, foreign invasions and Civil War would all emerge within a year, but for a few weeks in the late winter and spring of 1917 a wonderful future seemed possible.



*International Women's Day in Petrograd 8<sup>th</sup> March 1917. Wikipedia*

### *Spain 1936: The anarchist revolution.*

Most revolutions start with idealistic rhetoric about freedom and rapidly become repressive, being ruled by an alpha male. When in July 1936 the Spanish Nationalists launched a military coup to overthrow a democratically elected Republican government, the leftish, socialist, anarchist, liberal and Communist forces fought back and the ensuing civil war lasted nearly three years. In that time the mass movement for a social and economic revolution was led by the Anarchists. In Spain they were a predominantly working class mass movement and collectivised agriculture and industry, most prominently in Catalonia and neighbouring areas. Those farmers and shopkeepers wishing to stay individualists were tolerated, there were no dictatorial leaders, or personality cults, no fixed positions of power, no fierce repression of disagreement. Decisions were by consensus. Militia officers were elected and had no privileges. The communes and militias did not fail, they were destroyed by Nationalist forces expanding the front lines and also by supposedly allied Stalinists, who behind the lines, brought in the tanks.

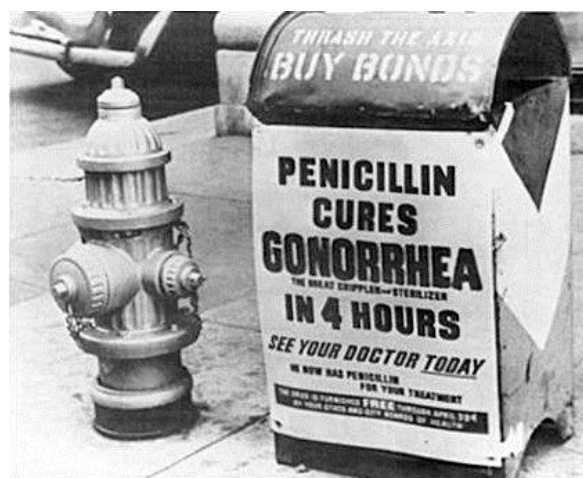


*Anarchist militia women Wikipedia*



### *The Invention and Manufacture of Penicillin.*

Even in the ancient world physicians used mould to cure cuts. In the last third of the nineteenth century scientific research on the possible healing properties of mould started, but it was not until the early 1940s that the first laboratory made penicillin was used on patients. In 1943 Australia became the first nation to allow commercial sales to civilians. Few could get it as in that year only thirty Americans could be supplied with it. By May 1944 penicillin was widely available for American soldiers. In March 1945 the first commercial sales to civilians in the USA were made and the Nobel Prize in medicine was awarded to Alexander Fleming, Howard Florey and Ernest Chain for the discovery and development of penicillin. With the war over massive numbers of civilians could buy the drug. How many lives were saved is incalculable. After 1945 (in the western world at least) few people died of infected cuts, meningitis, septicaemia, rheumatic fever, kidney infections, scarlet fever, diphtheria, syphilis or pneumonia. Other diseases which rarely led to death by themselves, such as trachoma, tonsillitis, gonorrhoea and many ear, eye and nose infections could also be rapidly cured. Even headaches, rashes and cuts could be cured by penicillin. Since the 1980s speculation centres on bacteria and bugs developing an invincible resistance to antibiotics, but even if this happens for over seventy years penicillin worked a medical miracle.



*A South Carolina poster from the 1940s. Public Domain/Wikipedia*

### *India's Green Revolution.*

After gaining independence in 1947 India's government worked to dramatically increase agricultural production. India had periodically suffered famines; one of the worst had hit Bengal in 1943, causing millions of deaths and widespread starvation and displacement amongst the survivors. By breeding stronger seeds, using different varieties, installing irrigation and importing pesticides, harvesters, tractors and other industrialised farming equipment, agricultural production eventually increased, at times dramatically. Grains were the main area for success to the extent that India went from being a food importer to overall self-sufficiency. By the twenty-first century India could at times become a food exporter in some specialised areas. After 1947 famine had been avoided despite an approximate threefold increase in population in the hundred years between 1918 and 2018.



*New varieties of wheat.*

*Wikipedia*

Since Tuchman's speech in 1980 the world saw:

### *Gorbachev's Revolution.*

Glasnost (Russian for openness) opened the way for the fossilised world of Russian Marxist Leninism to implode; unfortunately Gorbachev's great ideas for its replacement, a more dynamic freer society, only managed to go halfway and money now rules.

### *The Fall of the Berlin Wall.*

After Gorbachev promised not to invade Warsaw Pact nations Communist governments found their iron control over their populations was rusting away. When Hungary allowed its people to migrate and loosened its border with the west, East Germans suddenly found Hungary a wonderful holiday destination, one never to return from. At a November 1989 meeting about how this affected the Berlin Wall a garbled idea about what to do got out as a message to open the wall. Within hours the gates were opened, and even many guards left with those thousands who were suddenly fleeing. That night the wall was climbed while enthusiasts attacked it with sledge hammers. Germans, cruelly separated since the wall's establishment in 1961, were jubilantly reunited.

### *The international space station and weather satellites.*

In 1998 the international space station was established and by 2000 was a regular home to six astronauts. As in Stanley Kubrick's science fiction fantasy *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) former Cold War enemies Russia and the USA worked together on the space station. It was a welcome relief to see this futuristic film getting it right and all those WW3 Russia verses America nuclear devastation films getting it wrong. The space station functions not only as an observation point, but as a centre for research that would not be possible

on earth. Satellites now make weather reports much more accurate and quicker: predicting approaching meteors, cyclones, storms, floods and droughts.



*Cyclone Felix September 2007 Nasa/Public Domain/Wikipedia*

### *Solar Energy:*

Cheap and non-polluting, it is only a few decades past that this energy source seemed far-fetched, even for science fiction, powering cars, light surgery and heat from sunlight? Impossible! No, it is beyond possible. Solar energy appears likely to replace coal. That resource often eventually kills those who work for it, scars the land and poisons the air.



*Photographer: Christoffer Riemer. A welcome and ubiquitous sight Wikipedia/  
Creative Commons.*

### *Apartheid ends.*

In 1993 Nelson Mandela was able to end the ugly undemocratic world of Apartheid without the bloodshed that many (including this author) expected. South Africa still has widespread poverty, pollution and one of the world's highest crime rates. Even so, unlike under apartheid, some have been able to advance beyond this level. Even those not that fortunate can now have a say in how they are ruled. They can also run for office, purchase alcohol, travel where they wish and marry who they wish. Segregated schools, hospitals and neighbourhoods are no longer enforced, progress!

As Tuchman said, there are negatives here in almost all of these moments. The main negative remains that so many were only moments. Despite the failures, the betrayals and the ossification, those moments remain, fortunately as glimpses into what could still be a better future.



*Courtesy Wikipedia*