

*Books for the World Ahead*

NIALL FERGUSON

*Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future.* BY IAN MORRIS. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010, 768 pp.

It may seem at first sight a little odd to recommend a history book as a guide to the future. But Morris' new book illustrates perfectly why one really scholarly book about the past is worth a hundred fanciful works of futurology. Morris is the world's most talented ancient historian, a man as much at home with state-of-the-art archaeology as with the classics as they used to be studied. Here, he has brilliantly pulled off what few modern academics would dare to attempt: a single-volume history of the world that offers a bold and original answer to the question, Why did the societies that make up "the West" pull ahead of "the Rest" not once but twice, and most spectacularly in the modern era after around 1500? Wearing his impressive erudition lightly—indeed, writing with a wit and clarity that will delight the lay reader—Morris uses his own ingenious index of social development as the basis for his answer. He also dares to pose explicitly some fascinating counterfactual questions. What if the Chinese had conquered the New World before the Europeans got there in the fifteenth century? What if the West had ended up subjugated by the East in the nineteenth century, instead of the other way around? Precisely because he has such a profound understanding of the ways that culture, technology, and geography interact over the very long run, Morris is better qualified than almost anyone else to an-

swer the final question he asks: Is the world heading for "the Singularity"—a technological quantum leap beyond our traditional limitations as a species—or for a disastrous nightfall brought on by climate change, famine, state failure, mass migration, pandemic disease, and nuclear war? Readers will find nothing better on the subject than his final, mind-blowing chapter.

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