5,000 years of civilization

Lining a wall in my study is the Wall Chart of World History — 12 feet long. It captures in linear form about 5,000 years of recorded history.

The chart reminds me just how many people have come and gone — about 250 generations — since our ancestors developed language, writing, agriculture and permanent settlements.

It’s estimated more than 100 billion people have walked the earth.

The cast of characters constantly changed, but technology didn’t change all that much until recently — the last 200 years. Since then, change has come at warp speed:

* Electricity to provide light after centuries of darkness. A world wired to generating plants which power a panoply of labor-saving devices.
* Cars and trucks that go anywhere and everywhere.
* Airplanes that lift people high in the sky, transport them thousands of miles in a few hours, and land them safely again.
* Computers that store libraries of information and solve complex equations in nanoseconds. Instant communication anywhere on earth by word, voice, and visually.

* Smartphones to put computing, storage, and communication power in the palm of our hands.
* Modern medicine to extend life expectancy and alleviate pain. (We have yet to solve aging.)

But are we happier? Annual surveys begun after the Second World War report that people are less happy today than when the surveys began.

And while America is the richest, most powerful nation on earth, that may not last much longer.

Myriad civilizations have risen and fallen over the centuries, and the march of history never stops.

Two centuries ago, Great Britain was the predominate global power. Its “imperial century” stretched from its victory over Napoleon in 1815 until two world wars depleted its resources.

Since 1945, America has led the world.

But our domination in the future may be short-lived. China, with a greater population than America and Europe combined, is forecast to eclipse America’s economic output within the next five years.

Of course, our immediate attention is focused on the pandemic, which has turned everyone’s life upside down. It has forced us to keep isolated from each other and devastated our economy. But as we’ll discuss Thursday, there may be even more dramatic changes to come.