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Article 1.

NYT

Pay Attention

Thomas L. Friedman

May 28, 2011—Cairo -- I had some time to kill at the Cairo airport the other day so I rummaged through the "Egyptian Treasures" shop. I didn't care much for the King Tut paper weights and ashtrays but was intrigued by a stuffed camel, which, if you squeezed its hump, emitted a camel honk. When I turned it over to see where it was manufactured, it read: "Made in China." Now that they have decided to put former President Hosni Mubarak on trial, I hope Egyptians add to his indictment that he presided for 30 years over a country where nearly half the population lives on $2 day and 20 percent are unemployed while it is importing low-wage manufactured goods — a stuffed camel, no less — from China.

That's an embarrassment for Mubarak and America, which has donated some $30 billion in aid to modernize Egypt's economy over the last 30 years — and President Obama just promised a couple billion more. Egypt's economy has nose-dived since the uprising, and the new government really does need the money to stay afloat. But I only hope that Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton understand that right now — right this second — Egypt needs something more from Washington than money: quiet, behind-the-scenes engagement with Egypt's ruling generals over how to complete the transition to democracy here.

Here's why. After the ouster of Mubarak in February, his presidential powers were shifted to a military council, led by the defense minister. It's an odd situation, or as the Egyptian novelist Alaa Al Aswany, author of "The Yacoubian Building," put it to me: "We have had a revolution here that succeeded — but is not in power. So the goals of

the revolution are being applied by an agent, the army, which I think is sincere in wanting to do the right things, but it is not by nature revolutionary."

To their credit, the Egyptian generals moved swiftly to put in place a pathway to democracy: elections for a new Parliament were set for September; this Parliament will then oversee the writing of a new Constitution, and then a new civilian president will be elected. Sounds great on paper, and it was endorsed by a referendum, but there's one big problem: The Tahrir Square revolution was a largely spontaneous, bottom-up affair. It was not led by any particular party or leader. Parties are just now being formed. If elections for the Parliament are held in September, the only group in Egypt with a real party network ready to roll is the one that has been living underground and is now suddenly legal: the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.

"Liberal people are feeling some concerns that they made the revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood can now take it. This is not true," Esam el-Erian, one of the party's leaders, insisted to me.

But that is exactly what the urban, secular moderates, who actually did spearhead the Tahrir revolt, fear. They are only now forming parties and trying to build networks that can reach the millions of traditional Egyptians living in the countryside and persuade them to vote for a reform agenda and not just: "Islam is the answer."

"The liberal parties need more time to organize," said Naguib Sawiris, an Egyptian billionaire who's heading the best organized of the liberal parties, and is urging all the liberal groups to run under a single banner and not divide their vote.

If elections happen in September and the Muslim Brotherhood wins a plurality it could have an inordinate impact on writing Egypt's first truly free Constitution and could inject restrictions on women, alcohol, dress, and the relations between mosque and state. "You will

have an unrepresentative Parliament writing an unrepresentative Constitution," argued Mohamed ElBaradei, the former international atomic energy czar who is running for president on a reform platform.

"Because the Muslim Brotherhood is ready, they want elections first," adds Osama Ghazali Harb, another reform party leader. "We as secular forces prefer to have some time to consolidate our parties. We must thank the army for the role it played. But it was our revolution, not a coup d'état. ... If there are fair elections, the Muslim Brotherhood will only get 20 percent."

Free elections are rare in the Arab world, so when they happen, everybody tries to vote — not only the residents of that country. You can be sure money will flow in here from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to support the Muslim Brotherhood.

America, though, cannot publicly intervene in the Egyptian election debate. It would only undermine the reformers, who have come so far, so fast, on their own and alienate the Egyptian generals. That said, though, it is important that senior U.S. officials engage quietly with the generals and encourage them to take heed of the many Egyptian voices that are raising legitimate concerns about a premature runoff.

In short, the Egyptian revolution is not over. It has left the dramatic street phase and is now in the seemingly boring but utterly vital phase of deciding who gets to write the rules for the new Egypt. And how Egypt evolves will impact the whole Arab world. I just hope the Obama team is paying attention. This is so much more important than Libya.

Article 2.

NY Daily News

President Obama has right goals on Israeli-Palestinian peace, but strategy already backfiring

Alan Dershowitz

May 27th 2011 -- Now that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is back in Israel and President Obama is traveling around Europe, it is time to assess the effect their dueling speeches have had on the prospects for peace.

There is one factual conclusion on which the Israelis and the Palestinians completely agree: following President Obama's recent speech — and repeated explanation of it — on the Israel-Palestine conflict, we are further than ever from peace negotiations. Obama has managed, in one fell swoop, to harden the positions of both sides and to create distrust of him by Israelis and Palestinians alike.

My criticism of the President is not directed at whether he is pro-Israel or anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian or anti-Palestinian. In fact, I believe that his actions have not been motivated by any antagonism toward the Jewish state. He simply does not understand the dynamics of Middle East negotiation. I am disappointed in him not because I support Israel (which I do), but because I support peace based on a two-state solution. I agree with Obama about his ends, while disagreeing about his means.

Indeed there is little in the content of the President's statements with which I disagree. Rather, it is with his negotiating strategy, his constant need to explain himself, and his utter tone-deafness to the music, as distinguished from the lyrics.

The President has asked the Israelis to agree to negotiate new borders based on the 1967 lines, with land swaps. But he did so without asking the Palestinians to agree to drop their demand that millions of

so-called "refugees" — those who fled or left Israel during the 1947-49 Arab attacks against the Jewish state, and their descendents — be allowed to "return" to Israel. New borders would be meaningless if this demographic bomb were to be dropped on Israel, turning it into yet another Arab state with a Palestinian majority.

Everyone knows, as a matter of reality, that this is not going to happen, just as everyone knows that Israel will eventually give up most of the West Bank as it did the Gaza Strip. But it is critical to any successful negotiation that these two issues – borders and "the right to return" – be negotiated together. The Israelis will never agree to generous borders for the Palestinians unless they are assured that their identity as the nation-state of the Jewish people will not be demographically undercut by "the right of return." And the Palestinians will never give up their emotionally charged right of return unless that is an unambiguous prerequisite to achieving statehood with generous borders. The Obama strategy — to demand generous borders from Israel first and leave the right of return to subsequent negotiations — is a prescription for stalemate.

The President also helped cement the status quo by expressing his agreement with Israel's refusal to negotiate with a Palestinian government that includes Hamas — unless that terrorist group first renounces violence, accepts Israel and supports prior agreements. The current position of the Israeli government is to invite the Palestinian authority to begin negotiations now, but to insist, before any final agreement is reached, that Hamas either accept the President's current conditions or be excluded from the government. By going further than the Israeli government — by seeming to justify an Israeli refusal even to begin negotiations with the Palestinian Authority until Hamas accepts those conditions or the Palestinian Authority rejects Hamas — the President has made it harder for the Netanyahu government to resist the demands of Israeli extremists who oppose all negotiations.

Netanyahu originally planned to come to Washington with a generous peace proposal to entice the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. But Obama painted him into a corner and made him change his script by notifying him, as he was about to board his plane, that the President was going to call for Israel to return to its 1949-1967 lines, without also calling for the Palestinians to give up their right of return. By thus preempting the prime minister, he forced him to become more defensive of Israel's bargaining positions and less willing to offer specific, generous concessions. The result was a powerful speech in defense of Israel by Netanyahu, an overwhelmingly positive response from Congress and a movement away from peace negotiations.

All in all, the President's well-intentioned efforts to jump-start the peace process have backfired, not so much because he favors one side over the other, but because of the ham-handedness of his negotiation strategy. A negotiator or mediator whose statements move the parties further away from the negotiating table than they were before he spoke deserves a failing grade in the science of negotiation.

What the President should have done is to insist that both parties immediately agree to sit down and negotiate without any preconditions.

It's not too late. But it will take yet another "explanation" of what President Obama really meant in his ill-advised speech.

Dershowitz's most recent novel is "The Trials of Zion."

Article 3.

Al-Ahram Weekly

Who will win in September?

Abdel-Moneim Said

26 May - 1 June 2001 -- The revolution will continue to heave and surge and rage though various forms of clashes and demonstrations against conditions of the past and of the present. It will also continue to swing between the reaffirmation of national unity and the solidarity of "the crescent and the cross" and the propensity towards sectarian strife and its attendant confrontations, clashes, accusations and conflicting theories as to whether this phenomenon stems from a long festering infection in Egyptian political culture or to the "remnants" of the National Democratic Party and state security apparatus which, although dissolved and disbanded, are nevertheless suspected of engineering appalling incidents of violence and destruction.

Such a state of turmoil is typical of a revolution that is still in a state of revolution. However it will diminish and eventually cease as institutions of government coalesce and reassert the legitimacy of the state, thereby delegitimising revolution. Recall how the revolution cooled following the referendum over the constitutional amendments. Nevertheless, we also must note that as the spirit of revolution subsided, the spirit of sectarian strife and other doctrinal discords began to flare. Simultaneously, the leadership that had played the key role in igniting the revolution and bringing down the old regime seems to have faded from the scene or lost some of its glimmer. Curiously, while it was primarily young men and women who carried the revolution through its initial thrust and its first major victory, they have since been succeeded by much older people, some well into their 80s. Mohamed El-Baradei may merit a place among the ranks of

the revolutionary youth, having been one of the first to call for the downfall of the old regime and to advocate less conventional means of opposition. Yet it is odd that the field is now dominated people and groups that, in the past, had reached accommodations with the old regime, even if they had been in the opposition. In fact, it is precisely these circles that have provided most of the presidential candidates who are currently flitting from one press interview to the next.

All this will enter another phase with the legislative elections in September, at which time we will be able to speak of actual popular representation. Until then, every candidate, party and group will claim that they speak for "the people", "the masses," and "the nation", and they will continue to do so in increasingly strident tones all the way to the polls, which will ultimately sort day from night.

One naturally wonders who will come out ahead in the forthcoming electoral battle, which will probably be one of the most crucial moments in Egyptian history. Certainly, the general lay of the field is already clear. It is characterised by two main orientations, one religious, the other secularist. The Muslim Brotherhood, represented by its Freedom and Justice Party, leads the former camp, which also consists of Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, the Egyptian Jihad and the various shades of Salafis. They are likely to win the sympathy of quite a few Sufi orders as well as a number of the old NDP apparatchiks who often rallied against the Ahmed Nazif government in the pre-November 2010 parliament. The other camp, which is championed by a broad front of the movements that spearheaded the revolution and similar coalitions, is beginning to coalesce in political party form, although there is little to suggest that their parties will be familiar enough to the public or sufficiently prepared by election time. Nevertheless, they will be joined by Egyptian Christians, most of the liberal and leftist parties, such as the Wafd, the Nasserist Party and

the Tagammu, as well as by a large collection of NGOs and other representatives of civil society.

To some extent, these general orientations shaped the stances, whether for or against, in the referendum on the constitutional amendments, which drew the first clear lines in the post-25 January political map. In that referendum, the first camp obtained 77.2 per cent of the vote versus 22.8 per cent for the second. However, it is important to bear in mind that, in this referendum, a "critical mass" of voters sided with the first camp because they felt that the amendments bill offered the clearest path to the transition from revolutionary legitimacy to the legitimacy of the established state, which is to say to the return to normalcy that Egyptians desperately yearned for at the time. But this sentiment will no longer be a major factor now that this wish has come true and elections are at hand in September. Therefore, it remains open which way this key group of voters will swing in those elections, the results of which will be crucial to the subsequent selection of the constitutional committee and then to the choice of president.

Several factors will be instrumental in determining the impact of the "critical mass" of Egyptian voters. Foremost among them will be their turnout at the polls. Only 41 per cent of the 45 million eligible voters took part in the referendum. This relatively low figure could be increased by increasing the number of polling stations, of which there are only 44,000 at present, a factor that has long deterred all but the most committed from braving long voting queues. Secondly, although judicial supervision will now guarantee the integrity of the polls and ensure that people's votes really do count, the proportional electoral list system will yield very different kinds of results than those produced by the individual candidate system. A third critical factor will be campaign financing. Election campaigns and buying television air-time in particular have become extraordinarily

expensive. However, there is a huge discrepancy in the financial capacities of the two camps. The secular camp can not even dream of matching the financial resources of the Muslim Brotherhood and the remnants of the NDP. Finally, much will depend on the ability of the rivals to win public support by means of clear and succinct electoral platforms that truly address people's hopes and aspirations.

On the basis of the foregoing criteria and circumstances as they currently stand, the "critical mass" is likely to swing towards the religious camp, with its better organisational, mobilisational and financial capacities. In addition, even if that camp truly relinquished the slogan, "Islam is the solution," it still possesses a remarkable talent for swaying public opinion through emotive and misleading oversimplifications and attacks on the opposing viewpoint. For example, during the referendum on the constitutional amendments, it centred its propaganda around Article 2, claiming that a "No" vote would negate the Islamic character of the state. Although the proposed constitutional amendments in the referendum came nowhere near this article, the tactic worked marvellously, and helped yield this camp's desired result.

The secularists, therefore, have their work cut out for them. They will need to expand their base of support considerably and to try to use the proportional list system to their best advantage. They will also have to enlist the moral and financial support of the business community. Finally, they must couch their liberal secularist message in a simpler and graspable language that will capture the public's attention. Their ability to rise to this challenge will determine the future of Egypt, the Egyptian constitution and the nature of its government. The more effective they are the lower is the probability that the country's first free and fair parliamentary elections will be its last.

Article 4.

Asia Times

Show goes on in Iraq's political circus

Sami Moubayed

May 28, 2011 -- DAMASCUS - Iraq has been absent from the world's radar since upheaval rocked the Arab world in January, toppling the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and sending shockwaves through Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria.

A closer look at the political scene in Baghdad, however, shows that all is not well. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is in hot water, like many of his Arab counterparts - and his government might collapse soon, if not through street power, then perhaps through the shattering of the delicate balance in the upper echelons of Baghdad.

Last week Maliki hinted that he may resign and call new elections, just five months after forming his second cabinet. Two months ago, large and angry demonstrations broke out in Baghdad, inspired by the Arab Spring, chanting against corruption, poor government services, and the prime minister.

Among other things, he was accused of mismanagement of public office, abuse of power, authoritarianism and sectarianism. Maliki promised immediate action within the next 100 days. That deadline expires in July and there is nothing on the horizon to prove that the prime minister is willing, or capable, of living up to his promises.

There is also a daily barrage of accusations against him by his predecessor Iyad Allawi, who is backed by Saudi Arabia and other Arab heavyweights who are eager to topple Maliki - seen as an extension of Iranian influence in the Arab and Muslim world.

Iraq remains sharply divided between the prime minister and Allawi. The top seats in the ministries of defense and the interior are still vacant, and Maliki still denies Allawi the right to name the minister

of defense. Even worse, he personally still controls the two jobs in a caretaker capacity, and seems in no hurry to give them up any time soon.

On Tuesday, Allawi nominated two people for the Defense Ministry, ex-army officers Nouri al-Duleimy and Abdul-Majid Abdul Latif, but neither of them to date has been accepted by the prime minister. At a recent press conference, Maliki accused his rival of sectarianism and of breaching an agreement between them, hammered out last November.

Then, Allawi sluggishly agreed to accept Maliki as premier, although the latter controlled only 89 out of 325 seats in parliament whereas Allawi's secular National Iraqi List commanded a slim majority of 91 seats. Instead, Allawi would be given a new job, which rivals, and in some cases theoretically challenges, that of the prime minister - chairman of the National Council for Strategic Policies (NCSP). That post, six months down the road, is still nowhere close to being formed. Allawi complains that his coalition is being treated "not as a partner but as a participant" in the Maliki government.

Allawi accepted the novel post with a grain of salt. It took heavy lobbying by Saudi Arabia, and a phone call from US President Barack Obama, to convince him to settle for the NCSP, along with assurances that the body would have real powers, rather than ceremonial duties.

The new council was supposed to operate under the umbrella of the Iraqi executive branch and replace the National Security Council, mandated to monitor government ministers and make sure that they carry out their duties according to the constitution. Additionally, the council was supposed to have several branches: (domestic) political affairs, foreign policy, economic and monetary affairs, security and military affairs, energy, oil and gas, electricity, water and environmental affairs.

The council would have a president, or secretary general, an entire staff and premises allocated by the Iraqi government in Baghdad. The council will also have its own budget, which is yet to be determined but will equal that of the premiership, the parliamentary speaker and the presidency. Allawi will reportedly be entitled to approximately 100 advisers and two military units to protect him and the council from terrorist operations.

Because of so much deliberate delay, Allawi recently announced that he was no longer interested in the offer, and that he too would back out on his agreement with Maliki and call for early elections.

If that happens, there is no telling what kind of vacuum will emerge in Iraq and who will fill it, especially as Arab countries have too much on their plate at this stage to focus on Iraq.

Theoretically, with Saudi Arabia focused on the situation in Bahrain and Syria occupied by internal problems, the only country willing and able to do the job is Iran. All eyes are now focused on Iraqi Kurdistan President Masoud al-Barazani, who has said he will launch a new initiative to bridge the gap between Maliki and Allawi.

A 15-man committee has been formed to conduct shuttle diplomacy between the two leaders, under the auspices of Barazani, and to date they have made no contacts with any of the Arab countries neighboring Iraq, or with the Iranians. Last October, Barazani's name graced a deal, known as the Irbil Agreement, where all parties agreed to form a national partnership government. Under the agreement, Maliki and President Jalal Talabani would retain their posts, while Allawi would get to chair the NCSP.

The real problem facing Iraq today, and explaining Maliki's delay, is fear of what the NCSP will mean for Iraq once both Maliki and Allawi are out of office. The November agreement did not state whether the council would permanently be under the control of

Allawi's Iraqiya bloc, or whether different parties, or sects, would rotate within its leadership in future years.
Iraqis need to decide whether the council's leader will always be a Shi'ite, given that Allawi is Shi'ite, or whether Sunnis, Kurds and Christians will be entitled to compete for the post. If the new council will have powers equal to that of the prime minister, will it become part of the sectarian division of power in Iraq? Will it become a permanent seat that is given to the "second runner up" in any parliamentary election? And what will its status become if Allawi becomes prime minister one day?
Would it stay with Allawi's team or will it go to the "defeated" coalition in parliament? If this is the case, it needs to be said, either in writing or gentleman's agreement; especially that in today's case, Allawi's team is not a minority in parliament, but actually, the coalition with the largest number of seats.

Sami Moubayed is a university professor, historian, and editor-in-chief of Forward Magazine in Syria.

Article 5.

TIME

The Optimism Bias

Tali Sharot

May. 28, 2011 -- We like to think of ourselves as rational creatures. We watch our backs, weigh the odds, pack an umbrella. But both neuroscience and social science suggest that we are more optimistic than realistic. On average, we expect things to turn out better than they wind up being. People hugely underestimate their chances of getting divorced, losing their job or being diagnosed with cancer; expect their children to be extraordinarily gifted; envision themselves achieving more than their peers; and overestimate their likely life span (sometimes by 20 years or more).

The belief that the future will be much better than the past and present is known as the optimism bias. It abides in every race, region and socioeconomic bracket. Schoolchildren playing when-I-grow-up are rampant optimists, but so are grownups: a 2005 study found that adults over 60 are just as likely to see the glass half full as young adults.

You might expect optimism to erode under the tide of news about violent conflicts, high unemployment, tornadoes and floods and all the threats and failures that shape human life. Collectively we can grow pessimistic — about the direction of our country or the ability of our leaders to improve education and reduce crime. But private optimism, about our personal future, remains incredibly resilient. A survey conducted in 2007 found that while 70% thought families in general were less successful than in their parents' day, 76% of respondents were optimistic about the future of their own family. Overly positive assumptions can lead to disastrous miscalculations — make us less likely to get health checkups, apply sunscreen or open a

savings account, and more likely to bet the farm on a bad investment. But the bias also protects and inspires us: it keeps us moving forward rather than to the nearest high-rise ledge. Without optimism, our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat.

To make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities — better ones — and we need to believe that we can achieve them. Such faith helps motivate us to pursue our goals. Optimists in general work longer hours and tend to earn more. Economists at Duke University found that optimists even save more. And although they are not less likely to divorce, they are more likely to remarry — an act that is, as Samuel Johnson wrote, the triumph of hope over experience. Even if that better future is often an illusion, optimism has clear benefits in the present. Hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health. Researchers studying heart-disease patients found that optimists were more likely than nonoptimistic patients to take vitamins, eat low-fat diets and exercise, thereby reducing their overall coronary risk. A study of cancer patients revealed that pessimistic patients under the age of 60 were more likely to die within eight months than nonpessimistic patients of the same initial health, status and age.

In fact, a growing body of scientific evidence points to the conclusion that optimism may be hardwired by evolution into the human brain. The science of optimism, once scorned as an intellectually suspect province of pep rallies and smiley faces, is opening a new window on the workings of human consciousness. What it shows could fuel a revolution in psychology, as the field comes to grips with accumulating evidence that our brains aren't just stamped by the past. They are constantly being shaped by the future.

Hardwired for Hope?

I would have liked to tell you that my work on optimism grew out of a keen interest in the positive side of human nature. The reality is that I stumbled onto the brain's innate optimism by accident. After living through Sept. 11, 2001, in New York City, I had set out to investigate people's memories of the terrorist attacks. I was intrigued by the fact that people felt their memories were as accurate as a videotape, while often they were filled with errors. A survey conducted around the country showed that 11 months after the attacks, individuals' recollections of their experience that day were consistent with their initial accounts (given in September 2011) only 63% of the time. They were also poor at remembering details of the event, such as the names of the airline carriers. Where did these mistakes in memory come from?

Scientists who study memory proposed an intriguing answer: memories are susceptible to inaccuracies partly because the neural system responsible for remembering episodes from our past might not have evolved for memory alone. Rather, the core function of the memory system could in fact be to imagine the future — to enable us to prepare for what has yet to come. The system is not designed to perfectly replay past events, the researchers claimed. It is designed to flexibly construct future scenarios in our minds. As a result, memory also ends up being a reconstructive process, and occasionally, details are deleted and others inserted. To test this, I decided to record the brain activity of volunteers while they imagined future events — not events on the scale of 9/11, but events in their everyday lives — and compare those results with the pattern I observed when the same individuals recalled past events. But something unexpected occurred. Once people started imagining the future, even the most banal life events seemed to take a dramatic turn for the better. Mundane scenes brightened with upbeat details as if polished by a Hollywood script

doctor. You might think that imagining a future haircut would be pretty dull. Not at all. Here is what one of my participants pictured: "I was getting my hair cut to donate to Locks of Love [a charity that fashions wigs for young cancer patients]. It had taken me years to grow it out, and my friends were all there to help celebrate. We went to my favorite hair place in Brooklyn and then went to lunch at our favorite restaurant."

I asked another participant to imagine a plane ride. "I imagined the takeoff — my favorite! — and then the eight-hour-long nap in between and then finally landing in Krakow and clapping for the pilot for providing the safe voyage," she responded. No tarmac delays, no screaming babies. The world, only a year or two into the future, was a wonderful place to live in.

If all our participants insisted on thinking positively when it came to what lay in store for them personally, what does that tell us about how our brains are wired? Is the human tendency for optimism a consequence of the architecture of our brains?

The Human Time Machine

To think positively about our prospects, we must first be able to imagine ourselves in the future. Optimism starts with what may be the most extraordinary of human talents: mental time travel, the ability to move back and forth through time and space in one's mind. Although most of us take this ability for granted, our capacity to envision a different time and place is in fact critical to our survival. It is easy to see why cognitive time travel was naturally selected for over the course of evolution. It allows us to plan ahead, to save food and resources for times of scarcity and to endure hard work in anticipation of a future reward. It also lets us forecast how our current behavior may influence future generations. If we were not able to picture the world in a hundred years or more, would we be concerned

with global warming? Would we attempt to live healthily? Would we have children?

While mental time travel has clear survival advantages, conscious foresight came to humans at an enormous price — the understanding that somewhere in the future, death awaits. Ajit Varki, a biologist at the University of California, San Diego, argues that the awareness of mortality on its own would have led evolution to a dead end. The despair would have interfered with our daily function, bringing the activities needed for survival to a stop. The only way conscious mental time travel could have arisen over the course of evolution is if it emerged together with irrational optimism. Knowledge of death had to emerge side by side with the persistent ability to picture a bright future.

The capacity to envision the future relies partly on the hippocampus, a brain structure that is crucial to memory. Patients with damage to their hippocampus are unable to recollect the past, but they are also unable to construct detailed images of future scenarios. They appear to be stuck in time. The rest of us constantly move back and forth in time; we might think of a conversation we had with our spouse yesterday and then immediately of our dinner plans for later tonight. But the brain doesn't travel in time in a random fashion. It tends to engage in specific types of thoughts. We consider how well our kids will do in life, how we will obtain that sought-after job, afford that house on the hill and find perfect love. We imagine our team winning the crucial game, look forward to an enjoyable night on the town or picture a winning streak at the blackjack table. We also worry about losing loved ones, failing at our job or dying in a terrible plane crash — but research shows that most of us spend less time mulling over negative outcomes than we do over positive ones. When we do contemplate defeat and heartache, we tend to focus on how these can be avoided. Findings from a study I conducted a few years ago with

prominent neuroscientist Elizabeth Phelps suggest that directing our thoughts of the future toward the positive is a result of our frontal cortex's communicating with subcortical regions deep in our brain. The frontal cortex, a large area behind the forehead, is the most recently evolved part of the brain. It is larger in humans than in other primates and is critical for many complex human functions such as language and goal setting.

Using a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner, we recorded brain activity in volunteers as they imagined specific events that might occur to them in the future. Some of the events that I asked them to imagine were desirable (a great date or winning a large sum of money), and some were undesirable (losing a wallet, ending a romantic relationship). The volunteers reported that their images of sought-after events were richer and more vivid than those of unwanted events.

This matched the enhanced activity we observed in two critical regions of the brain: the amygdala, a small structure deep in the brain that is central to the processing of emotion, and the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (rACC), an area of the frontal cortex that modulates emotion and motivation. The rACC acts like a traffic conductor, enhancing the flow of positive emotions and associations. The more optimistic a person was, the higher the activity in these regions was while imagining positive future events (relative to negative ones) and the stronger the connectivity between the two structures. The findings were particularly fascinating because these precise regions — the amygdala and the rACC — show abnormal activity in depressed individuals. While healthy people expect the future to be slightly better than it ends up being, people with severe depression tend to be pessimistically biased: they expect things to be worse than they end up being. People with mild depression are relatively accurate when predicting future events. They see the world as it is. In other words,

in the absence of a neural mechanism that generates unrealistic optimism, it is possible all humans would be mildly depressed.

Can Optimism Change Reality?

The problem with pessimistic expectations, such as those of the clinically depressed, is that they have the power to alter the future; negative expectations shape outcomes in a negative way. How do expectations change reality?

To answer this question, my colleague, cognitive neuroscientist Sara Bengtsson, devised an experiment in which she manipulated positive and negative expectations of students while their brains were scanned and tested their performance on cognitive tasks. To induce expectations of success, she primed college students with words such as smart, intelligent and clever just before asking them to perform a test. To induce expectations of failure, she primed them with words like stupid and ignorant. The students performed better after being primed with an affirmative message.

Examining the brain-imaging data, Bengtsson found that the students' brains responded differently to the mistakes they made depending on whether they were primed with the word clever or the word stupid. When the mistake followed positive words, she observed enhanced activity in the anterior medial part of the prefrontal cortex (a region that is involved in self-reflection and recollection). However, when the participants were primed with the word stupid, there was no heightened activity after a wrong answer. It appears that after being primed with the word stupid, the brain expected to do poorly and did not show signs of surprise or conflict when it made an error. A brain that doesn't expect good results lacks a signal telling it, "Take notice — wrong answer!" These brains will fail to learn from their mistakes and are less likely to improve over time. Expectations become self-fulfilling by altering our performance and actions, which ultimately affects what happens in the future. Often, however, expectations

simply transform the way we perceive the world without altering reality itself. Let me give you an example. While writing these lines, my friend calls. He is at Heathrow Airport waiting to get on a plane to Austria for a skiing holiday. His plane has been delayed for three hours already, because of snowstorms at his destination. "I guess this is both a good and bad thing," he says. Waiting at the airport is not pleasant, but he quickly concludes that snow today means better skiing conditions tomorrow. His brain works to match the unexpected misfortune of being stuck at the airport to its eager anticipation of a fun getaway.

A canceled flight is hardly tragic, but even when the incidents that befall us are the type of horrific events we never expected to encounter, we automatically seek evidence confirming that our misfortune is a blessing in disguise. No, we did not anticipate losing our job, being ill or getting a divorce, but when these incidents occur, we search for the upside. These experiences mature us, we think. They may lead to more fulfilling jobs and stable relationships in the future. Interpreting a misfortune in this way allows us to conclude that our sunny expectations were correct after all — things did work out for the best.

Silver Linings

How do we find the silver lining in storm clouds? To answer that, my colleagues — renowned neuroscientist Ray Dolan and neurologist Tamara Shiner — and I instructed volunteers in the fMRI scanner to visualize a range of medical conditions, from broken bones to Alzheimer's, and rate how bad they imagined these conditions to be. Then we asked them: If you had to endure one of the following, which would you rather have — a broken leg or a broken arm? Heartburn or asthma? Finally, they rated all the conditions again. Minutes after choosing one particular illness out of many, the volunteers suddenly found that the chosen illness was less

intimidating. A broken leg, for example, may have been thought of as "terrible" before choosing it over some other malady. However, after choosing it, the subject would find a silver lining: "With a broken leg, I will be able to lie in bed watching TV, guilt-free." In our study, we also found that people perceived adverse events more positively if they had experienced them in the past. Recording brain activity while these reappraisals took place revealed that highlighting the positive within the negative involves, once again, a tête-à-tête between the frontal cortex and subcortical regions processing emotional value. While contemplating a mishap, like a broken leg, activity in the rACC modulated signals in a region called the striatum that conveyed the good and bad of the event in question — biasing activity in a positive direction.

It seems that our brain possesses the philosopher's stone that enables us to turn lead into gold and helps us bounce back to normal levels of well-being. It is wired to place high value on the events we encounter and put faith in its own decisions. This is true not only when forced to choose between two adverse options (such as selecting between two courses of medical treatment) but also when we are selecting between desirable alternatives. Imagine you need to pick between two equally attractive job offers. Making a decision may be a tiring, difficult ordeal, but once you make up your mind, something miraculous happens. Suddenly — if you are like most people — you view the chosen offer as better than you did before and conclude that the other option was not that great after all. According to social psychologist Leon Festinger, we re-evaluate the options postchoice to reduce the tension that arises from making a difficult decision between equally desirable options.

In a brain-imaging study I conducted with Ray Dolan and Benedetto De Martino in 2009, we asked subjects to imagine going on vacation to 80 different destinations and rate how happy they thought they

would be in each place. We then asked them to select one destination from two choices that they had rated exactly the same. Would you choose Paris over Brazil? Finally, we asked them to imagine and rate all the destinations again. Seconds after picking between two destinations, people rated their selected destination higher than before and rated the discarded choice lower than before.

The brain-imaging data revealed that these changes were happening in the caudate nucleus, a cluster of nerve cells that is part of the striatum. The caudate has been shown to process rewards and signal their expectation. If we believe we are about to be given a paycheck or eat a scrumptious chocolate cake, the caudate acts as an announcer broadcasting to other parts of the brain, "Be ready for something good." After we receive the reward, the value is quickly updated. If there is a bonus in the paycheck, this higher value will be reflected in striatal activity. If the cake is disappointing, the decreased value will be tracked so that next time our expectations will be lower.

In our experiment, after a decision was made between two destinations, the caudate nucleus rapidly updated its signal. Before choosing, it might signal "thinking of something great" while imagining both Greece and Thailand. But after choosing Greece, it now broadcast "thinking of something remarkable!" for Greece and merely "thinking of something good" for Thailand. True, sometimes we regret our decisions; our choices can turn out to be disappointing. But on balance, when you make a decision — even if it is a hypothetical choice — you will value it more and expect it to bring you pleasure.

This affirmation of our decisions helps us derive heightened pleasure from choices that might actually be neutral. Without this, our lives might well be filled with second-guessing. Have we done the right thing? Should we change our mind? We would find ourselves stuck, overcome by indecision and unable to move forward.

The Puzzle of Optimism

While the past few years have seen important advances in the neuroscience of optimism, one enduring puzzle remained. How is it that people maintain this rosy bias even when information challenging our upbeat forecasts is so readily available? Only recently have we been able to decipher this mystery, by scanning the brains of people as they process both positive and negative information about the future. The findings are striking: when people learn, their neurons faithfully encode desirable information that can enhance optimism but fail at incorporating unexpectedly undesirable information. When we hear a success story like Mark Zuckerberg's, our brains take note of the possibility that we too may become immensely rich one day. But hearing that the odds of divorce are almost 1 in 2 tends not to make us think that our own marriages may be destined to fail. Why would our brains be wired in this way? It is tempting to speculate that optimism was selected by evolution precisely because, on balance, positive expectations enhance the odds of survival. Research findings that optimists live longer and are healthier, plus the fact that most humans display optimistic biases — and emerging data that optimism is linked to specific genes — all strongly support this hypothesis. Yet optimism is also irrational and can lead to unwanted outcomes. The question then is, How can we remain hopeful — benefiting from the fruits of optimism — while at the same time guarding ourselves from its pitfalls?

I believe knowledge is key. We are not born with an innate understanding of our biases. The brain's illusions have to be identified by careful scientific observation and controlled experiments and then communicated to the rest of us. Once we are made aware of our optimistic illusions, we can act to protect ourselves. The good news is that awareness rarely shatters the illusion. The glass remains half full. It is possible, then, to strike a

balance, to believe we will stay healthy, but get medical insurance anyway; to be certain the sun will shine, but grab an umbrella on our way out — just in case.

Sharot is a research fellow at University College London's Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging