

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Death of Truth*

MICHIKO  
KAKUTANI

# THE GREAT WAVE

'Profoundly  
inspiring'  
AI WEIWEI

'Dazzling and  
brilliant'  
WALTER ISAACSON

The Era of  
Radical  
Disruption and  
the Rise of the  
Outsider





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Michiko Kakutani is a Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic and the former chief book critic of the *New York Times*. She is also the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Death of Truth* and *Ex Libris*.

‘[A] deeply researched book . . . Useful lines to remember in this year of political choices’

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‘In this story, history—and hope—must keep on coming, however huge the catastrophe . . . strangely haunting’

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André Bishop

‘Kakutani contextualizes today’s crises—from rampant populism to rising instability to environmental destruction—in the broad sweep of world history and points to ways to move past this era’

*Foreign Policy Magazine*





BY  
MICHIKO KAKUTANI

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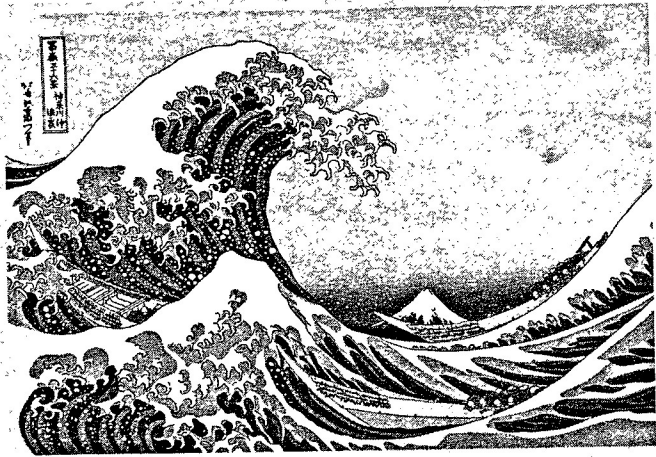
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THE GREAT WAVE





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# THE GREAT WAVE

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*The Era of Radical Disruption and  
the Rise of the Outsider*

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MICHIKO KAKUTANI



WILLIAM  
COLLINS

PUSATANA PERDANA



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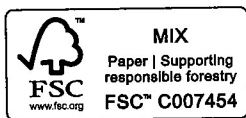
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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE GREAT WAVE—IT'S ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN and most widely reproduced images on the planet, an image that embodies the feelings of dread and hope that come with swift, unpredictable change.

Created around 1831 by the brilliant Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, the image has been embraced by multiple generations and cultures, from middle-class art lovers in Edo (Tokyo) delighted to acquire a wood-block print for the price of a bowl of noodles, to the nineteenth-century artists in France who helped formulate European modernism, to graffiti artists and skateboarders who have turned the wave into an instantly recognizable emoji and meme. Hokusai's print has been held up as a symbol of the Far East, the relationship between East and West, and the hazards of climate change and rising sea levels in the Anthropocene.

*The Great Wave* has been copied and reimagined, adapted, sampled, recycled, parodied, appropriated, and commodified. It now appears on surfboards, shower curtains, sneakers, umbrellas, watches, socks, scarves, towels, cuff links, coasters, and COVID masks. And, somehow, none of this merchandising has diluted the power of the original image, which continues to possess the resonance it did nearly two centuries ago.

The magic of Hokusai's print resides in both its imaginative detail—the terrifying surge of the gigantic wave, looming over three small fishing boats like a huge, pouncing tiger—and its metaphorical clout. When it first circulated in mid-nineteenth-century Japan (which was just opening to the world, after decades of isolation), the image reflected that island nation's anxieties about globalization: how the ocean, which had once protected Japan, was now a gateway for the invasion of foreigners and foreign ideas.

Today, *The Great Wave* once again embodies the dizzying turmoil and anxiety wrought by rapid change—this time, emotions belonging not to one nation but to an interconnected world, buffeted by political, economic, and technological upheaval.

The wave, of course, signifies the destructive power of nature and the chaotic forces of history that threaten to overwhelm us, sweeping away everything that feels familiar and safe. At first glance, that menacing wave is front and center in the print, but the viewer's eye is then drawn to the tiny image of Mount Fuji, way off in the distance, on the horizon line, tucked under the curl of the wave by a trick of perspective. Indeed, we are reminded that the formal title of this print is actually *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* and that it was published as part of Hokusai's popular wood-block series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, which offered three dozen portraits of the sacred mountain, beloved in Japan by poets, painters, and pilgrims and revered as a symbol of order and calm. The series was so popular that an extra ten prints were added to the sequence.

The images in *Thirty-Six Views* show groups of people and solitary individuals going about their daily lives—tending to their fishing boats and rice fields, sawing lumber and repairing

roofs. Pilgrims and travelers make their way up mountains and across bridges, while those with a bit of leisure time take in a theater performance or enjoy some time in the country. Nature in these prints is beautiful yet menacing: Sudden changes in the weather threaten to blow people's lives off course, while the sea remains a source of sustenance but also peril.

By juxtaposing the ominous swell of the ocean with the serene presence of Mount Fuji in *The Great Wave*, Hokusai captured both the risks of daily life and the possibility of transcendence, the dynamic between foreboding and harmony, motion and stillness, chaos and transformation.

THE GREAT WAVE OF change breaking over today's world is sweeping away old certainties and assumptions and creating an inflection point of both opportunity and danger.

A confluence of crises, both immediate and long-term, has made the military acronym VUCA—meaning volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—feel like a perfect description of the third decade of the third millennium. The term was used at the Army War College in the late 1980s to describe a world that was more unpredictable than the bipolar one of the Cold War era, but it has come to feel increasingly resonant today, as one emergency—from COVID, to the January 6 insurrection, to Putin's invasion of Ukraine—cascades into another, as an increasingly interconnected globe amplifies the “butterfly effect” famously described by Ray Bradbury in the story “A Sound of Thunder.”

Democracy is under threat in the United States, where Donald Trump and his Republican enablers are undermining trust in our electoral system and the rule of law. And democracy is under threat around the world, with the growth of extreme right-wing populism and the efforts of authoritarian

regimes to assert their influence on the global stage. COVID killed more than 6.9 million people across the globe and accelerated an array of troubling dynamics—from social isolation to political polarization to growing inequalities of income, opportunity, and access to health care. And in 2023, new developments in artificial intelligence caused some technology experts to call for a pause in the development of advanced AI, warning it “could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth,” which its creators do not yet understand and cannot reliably control.

Looming over all of this, like Godzilla, is the dark cloud of climate change and its deadly consequences for the planet.

No wonder the present feels so bewildering and calamitous that many of us are reaching to dystopian fiction to describe our predicament—1984, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Neuromancer*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *It Can’t Happen Here*.

Potent new dynamics are at work in this VUCA-verse, where technology is creating new asymmetries of power, and the process of disruption is driving change in politics, business, and technology. People are losing faith in old, top-down systems, and decentralized models of organization are being embraced by activists and entrepreneurs alike. In this ecosystem, more and more energy is moving from the margins toward the center, from the grassroots upward, from start-ups, protesters, and outsiders—a kind of countermovement to Big Tech’s monopolistic consolidation of power and the efforts of authoritarian leaders to centralize power in their own hands.

The historian Melvin Kranzberg once observed that “technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral,” and the same might well be said of the growing influence of outsiders. Some have demonstrated their courage, resolve, and imaginative

leadership, like Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky, a former actor and comedian (elected by a landslide in 2019) who rallied the free world around his country after Vladimir Putin launched an unprovoked invasion in early 2022. Others, like Donald Trump, are harrowing case studies in the hazards posed by ignorance, venality, and narcissism, combined with shamelessness and power.

The democratizing effects of the internet have given outsiders of every sort—from climate activists, to white nationalists, to would-be social media “influencers”—the ability to circumvent old-school gatekeepers. And this at a time when mistrust in the government and traditional sources of authority have been building since the economic meltdown of 2008, which fueled populist anger at institutions and elites.

These developments have created a vertiginous moment that has exposed our interdependent world's profound vulnerabilities. Growing cracks appear in the post-World War II order and the ever-accelerating pace of social and technological change have created what Alvin Toffler described, five decades ago, as “future shock” and “adaptive breakdown.”

But times of turmoil can also provide an opening for a reboot—for reassessing our priorities and operating principles. New ideas are more likely to gain traction during such periods, and newcomers are increasingly welcomed in once cloistered fields. In the early twenty-first century, outsiders are already revolutionizing science and medicine, while artists from once marginalized groups—including immigrants, African Americans, and women—are redefining literature, theater, music, and painting.

Times of tumult and chaos, the scholar Gershom Scholem once observed, can create “plastic hours”—“namely, crucial moments when it is possible to act. If you move then, some-



thing happens.” What Scholem meant, his biographer George Prochnik explained, is that there are interludes when history is in volatile flux, “when migrations of peoples and changing political alliances dissolved the status quo,” and “radical transformation” becomes a possibility.

IN FACT, HISTORY IS punctuated by stories of renewal, often in the midst of a war or crisis. For instance, in the 1930s, faced with a country reeling from the Great Depression—failing banks, bread lines, unemployment of nearly 25 percent—and the rise of Hitler abroad, Franklin D. Roosevelt went big with the New Deal, which not only rescued the flailing economy but reimagined the government’s social contract with the public and helped restore faith in democratic institutions.

To use today’s plastic hours to make essential course corrections, we must act quickly and decisively—not succumb to hand-wringing or denial or fatalism, those reflexive reactions in this age of information overload and outrage fatigue, when the 24-7 news cycle threatens to overwhelm us on a daily, even hourly basis, triggering cynicism and numbness. As a harrowing 2023 report from the UN’s panel on climate change warned, “there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future” by immediately making “deep, rapid, and sustained” reductions in fossil fuel consumption.

A similar urgency attends the crisis faced by American democracy today: whether we vote to affirm the Constitution and the rule of law, and the ideals of freedom and equal justice, or become an increasingly transactional and authoritarian state that defies the will of the people and tramples decades of progress made in civil rights and social justice.

That crisis is embodied in the person of the twice-impeached, four-times-indicted former president Donald Trump, who tried

to overturn the 2020 election and incited a violent insurrection against the government. But it is hardly confined to him, as the Republican Party has doubled down on his lies and efforts to sow mistrust in democratic institutions. This contagion is so virulent that in mid-2023, a third of the country believes Trump's lie that the 2020 election was stolen from him; an estimated 16 percent buys into the deranged conspiracy theories of QAnon; and an estimated 7 percent believes violence is justified to restore Trump to the White House. Such developments point to how far today's emergency extends beyond politics—how it goes to our very ability to process reality, to tell the difference between fact and fiction, between truth and fantasy.

This book will look at how we got to this surreal point in time, and what happened during earlier hinge moments in history, when social and economic changes, coupled with groundbreaking advances in technology, disrupted old paradigms and led to both social upheaval and path-breaking innovation. It will examine the larger dynamics undermining traditional sources of authority today, the accelerating migration of once fringe or radical ideas into the mainstream, and the struggle, across the political spectrum and across the globe, to define this watershed moment.

The stakes could not be higher: whether we surrender to the gathering chaos or find a way forward to protect democratic values and institutions and create a more equitable and sustainable future.



THE GREAT WAVE





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**'A profoundly inspiring and prophetic perspective  
on the contemporary world' AI WEIWEI**

**A great wave of change is breaking over our world.**

As people lose their faith in the old establishment, radical voices at the margins of politics and technology are disrupting the status quo. For better and for worse, ours is the time of the outsider – the protester, the populist, the hacker.

Michiko Kakutani brilliantly dissects these shifting power dynamics to look at ways forward. For there is always the promise of transformation in times of turmoil. We can surrender to the waters, or we can use the wave's momentum to propel us towards the shore.

**'Useful lines to remember' *GUARDIAN***

**'Strangely haunting' *NEW STATESMAN***

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**LAURENCE H. TRIBE**

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