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Malcolm Gladwell: When technology fails

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By **Richard Galant**, CNN
July 17, 2011 7:45 a.m. EDT



JAMES DUNCAN DAVIDSON / TED

Malcolm Gladwell said the story of the Norden bombsight is a cautionary tale about the promise of technology.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Malcolm Gladwell: U.S. invested heavily in WW II-era bombsight that often missed its mark
- At TED Global conference, he said today's drone attacks may be counterproductive
- Other speakers asked: Why can't we feed world's poorest?
- Alain de Botton: What can atheists learn from religion?

Edinburgh, Scotland (CNN) -- By the end of World War II, the United States military had spent \$1.5 billion on the Norden bombsight, a device that promised to be so accurate it was said a plane could drop a bomb in a pickle barrel from 20,000 feet, according to author Malcolm Gladwell.

Speaking Friday on the last day of the TED Global conference, Gladwell said the device, designed by engineer Carl Norden, indeed could allow bombers to hit their targets -- but only under perfect conditions, such as a cloudless sky. In the real world, the sight often failed to find its mark.

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In a raid on a German chemical plant, only 10% of thousands of bombs hit the target, said Gladwell, author of "The Tipping Point" and other best-sellers.

He posed the question: Why do people place so much faith in technology such as the Norden bombsight to solve problems?

Today, the U.S. military has a bomb-delivering device that truly can achieve great accuracy -- the drones firing missiles to attack

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militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet Gladwell argued that drones aren't necessarily accomplishing more than the flawed World War II-era bombsight; he said suicide attacks against Western targets have increased.

"The issue isn't the accuracy of the bombs you have, but how you use the bombs you have," and whether you should use them at all, he said.

Gladwell's question was one of a series of thought-provoking issues raised at the conference in the Scottish capital. TED, a nonprofit whose motto is "Ideas worth spreading," holds two high-profile conferences a year and distributes talks through its [website](#). (Selected talks are also made available on CNN.com through a partnership with TED.)

Meeting for the first time in Edinburgh, TED Global drew 850 people, from 70 countries.

Among the other questions raised in talks at the conference:

- **Can eight hugs a day make us happier?** [Paul Zak](#), a professor at Claremont Graduate University, who may be the only economist in the world to literally draw blood in his research, tracks levels of the hormone oxytocin, which he said his experiments show tend to rise when people place their faith in each other. He said hugging strangers is one way to stimulate production of oxytocin.

- **Why can't we feed the world's one billion hungry people?** Josette Sheeran, executive director of the United Nations' [World Food Programme](#), said a 17-cent package of nutrients with a chickpea base can meet the needs of a hungry infant, and more than enough food is grown to feed everyone, but still many wake up every day not knowing how they will be able to feed themselves. Her organization is scrambling to meet the threat of severe famine in the Horn of Africa.

- **What do China's young people want?** TV host and media entrepreneur Yang Lan, often called China's Oprah, painted a dramatic picture of the frustrations of young people in China. She said their nation lives with income inequality that is now greater than in the U.S., and young people want social justice and government accountability. They have to support aging parents, have generally low incomes and can look forward to working for as long as 30 or 40 years to pay for their first apartment.

- **What can atheists learn from religion?** Philosopher [Alain de Botton](#) said those who reject religion often make the mistake of dismissing the many benefits it provides. While not believing the doctrine of any religion, he said he admires how religious institutions transmit ideas, helping people meet their needs for consolation and guidance. In the secular world, we assume that if an idea is important, "we'll bump into it," he said. In the religious world, calendars remind people on specific days of virtues and moral imperatives. "Atheism 2.0" would look for ways to provide the equivalent of these benefits to nonbelievers, he said.

- **Has the West lost its work ethic?** Economic historian and Harvard professor [Niall Ferguson](#) counts the work ethic as one of "six killer apps" responsible for the "great divergence," the centuries-long dominance of the West over the East in economic, political and military power. (The other five "apps" are competition, the scientific revolution, property rights, modern medicine, and the consumer society.) Today the average Korean works 1,000 hours more per year than the average German, he said. Although he said the

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decline of the West isn't inevitable, the rise of the East is incontrovertible: "The great divergence is over, folks."

• **Can a plane also drive to its destination?** Anna Mracek Dietrich presented the case for "The Transition , an airplane her company is developing that also can serve as a car. It flies from one general aviation airport to another, but can also travel at highway speeds and meet auto safety standards. Its wings retract so it can be stored in an ordinary garage and it is fueled by unleaded auto gas, rather than more expensive aviation fuel. If the weather's too bad to fly, then the owner of such a plane could choose to drive. She said 100 people have put up \$10,000 deposits to show their interest in buying the Transition, which she said will go into production by the end of next year. Dietrich estimated the price of the plane/car at \$250,000 to \$300,000.

• **Can liars be detected?** Author [Pamela Meyer](#) said people lie from 10 to 200 times a day. Many of these are harmless white lies -- "I just fished your e-mail out of my spam folder" -- but often deception can have harmful consequences. She showed videotapes of untruths told by Bill Clinton and John Edwards in an effort to show patterns that could serve as telltale signs of deception.

• **What can doctors do for the dying?** Liver transplant surgeon and writer [Pauline Chen](#) said she learned through her own experience how important it is for doctors not to "run away" from dying patients and to recognize that medicine can't always cure. [Abraham Verghese](#), also an author and physician, said he learned that the ritual of a physical exam can powerfully communicate to a dying patient that a doctor will be there through the end, no matter what happens.

• **Why are we still in Afghanistan?** British Conservative MP [Rory Stewart](#), who has written about his travels in Afghanistan, said the successful Bosnia and Kosovo interventions of the 1990s gave the West false confidence about the potential gain from intervening militarily in foreign countries. Year after year, generals and diplomats have predicted that next year will be the "decisive year," he said, yet the Afghanistan war drags on, costing lives and tens of billions of dollars. The surge of troops has increased the violence in Afghanistan, rather than reducing it, he said.

Stewart said the presumption that a withdrawal from Afghanistan would enable the Taliban to retake the country and invite back al Qaeda is wrong; and that even if al Qaeda were invited back, it wouldn't likely pose an existential threat to Western countries. And if the goal is fighting terrorism, he said, Pakistan is a more serious threat than Afghanistan.



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aroth Hm...the world has problems, so therefore technology isn't useful. I see, well argued.

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defiant Humans are too primitive to use their technology to its fullest potential.

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nearnaco Absolutely Pakistan is the biggest threat

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OutNasa

I agree. They are playing two-face, but Iraq is also. The \$8B annual U.S. welfare-for-Israel is also a threat. If Israelis can't afford to have kids they too should stop having them. I resent subsidizing them with my tax dollars when so many of my fellow comrades are under-employed or out of wor... [more](#)

4 minutes ago | [Like \(5\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



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OutNasa Brain Boys - We can't feed the hungry BECAUSE people who can't afford to have kids keep getting pregnant. Did you really need to hold a conference to figure that one out? So, if you stopped "feeding the hungry" you'd eventually solve the problem.

18 minutes ago | [Like \(20\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



OutNasa celticWitch - Incorrect. IF you live in an area that is unable to grow crops - you CANNOT AFFORD to have children. "Afford" is broad scope, not economic.

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celticwitch LOL you'd solve the problem a lot quicker if we quit feeding the greedy!

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celticwitch correction, In a world where there is more than sufficient land to produce food for the entire population of the planet, we cannot feed the hungry because some take more than others. Duh.

9 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)

MrBottle "Why do court systems behave like auctions?"

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FreeLaw "Why can't Malcolm look like an adult male?"

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ShesGuilty I agree. Malcolm should focus more on looking like an adult male.

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ENII Humanity became dependent on technology when we made the first stone ax. Agriculture made the dependency permanent. Each major advancement allowed larger populations and greater dependency. We are riding the technological tiger and to dismount would mean the deaths of 6 billion people.

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celticwitch

Speak for yourself. I currently have property that is completely self-sufficient without the benefit of modern technology. No connection to the grid, no high tech solar devices or any other means of producing artificial power. Pure basics. If you can't live off the grid now, you won't be able to... [more](#)

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Idiodcracy that seems to be the difference between science and technology. Science solves problems, technology creates them.

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RoelofK

The last 40 years, the west have given 3 trillion \$ on aid to Africa without permanent succes. It's mostly their culture to blame. Islam for instance is dictatorship and dictatorship has a subscription on civil wars. You can give them food and hope they build up their country, but the next day they'... [more](#)

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allenwoll :: In virtually every instamnce, tecnology fails only when the task it is expected to perform -- the expectation -- is either NOT completely defined or the definition is utterly flawed -- as with the Norden Bombsight. . The NB could do nothing about erratic wind !!!

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thebeast

The reason why there are so many starving people in the world is simple...People, Cities and Governments control the production of food. If for example the city of Long Beach was to plant nothing but Avocado, Citrus, Fruit and Nut Trees and all manner of edible things along the 710 Highway for exam... [more](#)

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T40G The goal isn't figting terroism, as much as it's for control of the oil. But, I could be wrong. Why on earth, would anyone think it's about oil. Geeze.

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RayFinkle The tipping point is Gladwells haired! Half an inch more and he'll up-end.

1 hour ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



RayFinkle

Hmmm, a cheap way for the world food bank to breed even more uneducated, poor, starving, third world populations. That's all they are doing, They aren't solving hunger they are causing more of it. Keep the poor alive by the skin of their teeth and all you are doing is breeding even more poor and hu... [more](#)

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meinkampf

Greed is the root problem of most of the world social evils. There is enough food to feed every person on earth. Whole Foods, Trader Joes and Kroger throw away five tons of food a day, just three companies. There is enough water, shelter, cars, money for every one. But when you have one person li... [more](#)

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Lemondelta Regarding the driving plane: if it can travel highway speeds, what makes it superior to a bus? And why would you want to take a vehicle the size of a plane travelling at the same speed as an automobile? People take planes to reach their destinations quickly. I must be missing something

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Lemondelta @WowBow being a condescending prlck will get you nowhere.

I meant that if its unsuitable to fly, just drive a car surely rather than taxing your plane out of the hangar onto the freeway? And even a small plane would have trouble fitting onto a road, never mind trying to make it road legal...

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