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Professor Leon Fuerth and the Case for Forward Engagement

by Natalie Ambrose



Leon Fuerth, a research professor of international affairs at The George Washington University's Elliott School and the national security advisor to former Vice President Al Gore, is a distinguished scholar and public administrator, concerned with matters of national import, particularly with issues of governance and national security, and with the tendency of government leaders to discount the future and postpone complex decisions involving longer-term challenges. As he wrote in an article in the Spring 2006 issue of *The National Interest*, the US government is burdened by a bureaucratic and myopic approach to governance, problem solving, and policy formulation, which is totally insufficient for responding to the increasingly interrelated and accelerating challenges of today. Forward Engagement (FE) is Fuerth's answer for staying ahead of the curve – for identifying alternative options in order to better influence outcomes. FE describes a systematic process of using strategic and longer-range (up to 50 years out) foresight analysis in order to better engage, inform, and shape public policy.

FOREWARD ENGAGEMENT

Fuerth uses Forward Engagement (FE) to better anticipate and comprehend possible future developments in the broad categories of defense, economics, science and technology, and governance, as well as to better understand how these developments interact and influence each other. The phrase was derived from the Cold War era concept of "Forward Deployment," where the military places its forces at strategic locations chosen specifically to improve its ability to engage the enemy as early as possible, while it still has leverage and the time to maneuver. As Fuerth describes in his writings and on his website (<http://home.gwu.edu/~esialsf/index.html>), FE responds to three 21st century realities – (1) that we are facing an acceleration of major historical events, some of them carrying the potential for major societal and international consequences; (2) that society in general, and government in particular, need to address such possibilities as far in advance as possible, in terms of policies and resources; and (3) there needs to be a system to help government visualize more consistently what may be approaching in the longer-range future, and to deliberate possible responses in a more timely way.

While teaching at George Washington, Professor Fuerth has developed several capstone courses as part of his Forward Engagement (FE) project, which also receives support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. His classes have two related objectives – first, to have FE regarded as a substantive and applicable discipline; secondly, to use the concept as a means of instruction to better prepare young people for strategic thinking and leadership in public policy – as he explains, "in the real world, things are far more inter-connected than our specializations, and we filter out these connections at peril to our real

appreciation of what is shaping our lives.” And besides his teaching and extensive writing, Fuerth has also organized several important convening’s of experts, futurists and policy makers to introduce as well as to explore further the FE concept and its application to helping address the emerging global challenges of our times.

This past April 7th, I attended one of these convening’s, a full-day briefing titled “*Societal Tsunamis*.” The event’s objective was to engage expert thinking around three possible future discontinuities which, if they occurred, would result in significant societal impact requiring government action. The three discontinuities are geopolitical inversion, environmental dislocation, and evolutionary secession. According to Fuerth, these three complex and seemingly disparate scenarios actually share important characteristics – (1) they are fast moving, powerful forces of change which each appear to be gathering force; (2) they each are generating additional related sub-issues which should be addressed by policy-makers now, in the short term; and (3) the three scenarios have the potential of all coming into full fruition and impact more or less concurrently. According to Fuerth, discontinuities of such magnitude present significant challenges for the world as we know it – and for the United States, in terms of its democratic form of governance, which tends to be slow to identify, deliberate, and respond to new challenges and opportunities.

GEOPOLITICAL INVERSION

The first discussion of *geopolitical inversion* described a scenario where geo-economic power shifts massively and permanently to Asia, breaking the link between liberal democracy and the economic primacy of the US and other Western democracies. Clyde Prestowitz, founder and president of the Washington-based Economic Strategy Institute – which provides analysis of and consultation on matters concerning international trade, competitiveness and globalization – introduced this first theme. Prestowitz was an international businessman who served in the U.S. Commerce Department; he holds an MBA from Wharton, serves on various advisory boards, and is also author of several books including *Trading Places* (about U.S.-Japan relations) and *Three Billion New Capitalists: The Great Shift of Wealth and Power to the East*.

Prestowitz described two simultaneous revolutions now underway, which have big implications for the state of commerce, geopolitics, even the environment. The first is the movement of some 3 billion new people (the new capitalists and consumers in China and India) into the global economic system and second, the increasing compression – even erasure – of aspects of time and distance as a result of modern technology and advances in communications. He described the environmental implications of rapid new industrialization and how a new economic growth paradigm is needed, since the world can no longer support unmitigated growth and resource use along the path the US took during its development. Prestowitz also described the challenges and rivalries to come – in terms of economic, political, demographic, and military – which threaten to end the five-hundred-year run of Western domination of the world. He finds the United States position to be particularly fragile, due to factors like “its increasingly unsustainable trade deficits, the dangerous accumulation of huge dollar reserves in economies like Japan and China, and the end of its position as the world’s premier center for invention and manufacturing.”

ENVIRONMENTAL DISLOCATION

Dr. David Jhirad, Vice President of Science and Research at the World Resources Institute led the second session about how a possible *environmental dislocation* – in this case, rapid climate change – might break the fundamental links between current industrial civilization and nature. Dr. Jhirad, a native of India, is an international energy policy expert. His group compiles the data for the World Resources Institute’s Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT).

Dr. Jhirad argued that we have already reached a scientific tipping point and that climate change is now occurring all around us. According to Dr. Jhirad, the only uncertainties that remain are in the details; uncertainties about (1) the exact impacts of these changes on the world's people and ecosystems, (2) the rate of these changes, and (3) the nature and magnitude of such non-linear change. And the global ecological threat of climate change is profound – the impact of scenarios such as the de-glaciation of Greenland or the diversion of the Gulf Stream is comparable only to nuclear war in its subsequent implications on areas such as global food supply, water resources, etc. For Dr. Jhirad, the world no longer has the luxury of time to research, debate, and react. With the advent of growing economies like China and India, a tripling of current global energy consumption could occur by 2050. Governments and corporations must act now in terms of accelerated technological innovation (in energy production, in manufacturing, in transportation systems), strong leadership in energy policy and regulation, and robust private capital investment.

EVOLUTIONARY SUCCESSION

The final topic – *evolutionary secession* – described a scenario where science and technology give humans control over their own evolutionary future through manipulation of genetics and physical enhancements, as well as symbiosis with machine intelligence. Dr. William Sims Bainbridge, an American sociologist and co-director of Human-Centered Computing at the National Science Foundation, introduced this third session. Besides his work at NSF, Dr. Bainbridge is the author of numerous books on topics ranging from science fiction to trends in video gaming to his controversial research into the sociology of religion and religious cults.

Dr. Bainbridge gave examples of some of the new and converging research and capabilities occurring in the areas of biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology, genetics, and cognitive science. Some of these possibilities will be positive and beneficial; others may have totally unanticipated and dystopian ramifications. Per Bainbridge, “science is driving the future and at such a speed that we’re not prepared to deal with its consequences.” And whereas the debates during the 20th century were about science, religion, and evolutionary biology, those for this century will be around consciousness and what it means to be human.

At the end of this day of expert opinion and fascinating discussion, I came away with these conclusions. Each of these three discontinuities seems highly possible and if they do occur, their implications for the US and the world will be profound. Of course there are undoubtedly a few other discontinuities emerging, other scenarios that also have the potential to snowball and which need to be better articulated and understood. Each of the guest speakers felt that there is still time and opportunity for governments, policy makers, and the private sector, by their actions, to adjust and therefore help to shape the future course of events. But, they have to act now, with vision, creativity, and selfless leadership for both their respective as well as global common good. They must include an array of viewpoints and expertise in their deliberations. They must consider new and different paths towards and concepts of growth and wealth; that the market system, if encouraged, has the potential to generate innovative and just solutions. That there are risks even to established democracies – if they are unable to better anticipate or control future events, they may opt to resort to more draconian measures. In other words, each of the guest speakers reiterated the importance of Leon Fuerth’s case for “forward engagement” in governance and public policy.

Professor Leon Fuerth has had a distinguished career that has spanned some thirty years in the U.S. government, including key positions in the State Department, House and Senate staff, and with the Clinton White House, where he was Vice President Albert Gore’s National Security Adviser during both terms. He holds a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s degree in history from New York University, and a master’s degree in public administration from Harvard University. Since 2001, Fuerth has been a research professor of International affairs at The George Washington University’s Elliott

School in Washington DC. He has used this vantage point to further develop and promote his futures-based approach.

Natalie Ambrose has worked extensively in issues research and reporting, market assessment, new product/service development and marketing, and strategic planning, both in the for-profit and non-profit sectors. Most recently, she was Director of Emerging Issues and Strategic Planning for the Council on Foundations in Washington, DC. Ms. Ambrose has an MBA in International Marketing from "Thunderbird" (the American Graduate School of International Management) in Phoenix, Arizona and a BA in International Relations & Political Science from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Her professional affiliations include the Association of Professional Futurists (a Board Member), the World Future Society, the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals, and the National Press Club. She has lived, traveled, studied and worked in Canada, Western Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, and is fluent in Spanish. She can be reached at (email) ambrose.natalie@gmail.com.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- Try being a futurist. Would you add any additional discontinuities to Professor Fuerth's list? Also, what linkages might exist among the three discontinuities that he has identified? For example, will environmental dislocation impact the distribution of geostrategic power among nations and regions, and if so, how?
- The article discusses a shift of power and influence to Asia. What implications does this have for the dominance of US culture and values in various parts of the world? What implications for lifestyles and living standards? And, will English maintain its place as the de facto lingua franca?
- The trade deficit is an interesting dilemma. If China or another nation decides to sell off its US securities or even stops buying them in favor of Euros or another currency, the consequences to the US could be catastrophic – a sharp rise in interest rates and a precipitous decline in the value of the dollar. However, the other nation would be impacted too, in that as they begin selling their US securities, the value of their remaining holdings would drop. Thus, there is the seeming paradox that the trade deficit cannot be sustained indefinitely and yet both sides lose if either side moves to end it. As the expression goes, "What gives?"
- If the present economic model is unsustainable, what will the next generation economy and its utility function look like? Will the next economy be a growth economy (and in what sense) or a steady-state economy?
- The article refers to "a myopic approach to governance, problem solving, and policy formulation." Indeed, in some parts of the world, two key institutions, government and corporations, cultivate a near-term mindset that favors near-term gain over long-term consequences – many politicians through their interest in re-election, and many corporations through their "quarterly earnings statement" focus. Two questions: (1) Will the long-term focus in parts of Asia accelerate the geopolitical inversion problem discussed in the article? (2) How can Forward Engagement be cultivated where the pressures of re-election and the quarterly earnings statement rule the day?
- Professor Fuerth explains, "In the real world, things are far more interconnected than our specializations ...". Will the imperative for future studies lead to education that is more interdisciplinary and less specialized?