

## **Background Information on the April 7, 2006 “Societal Tsunamis” Conference**

Forward Engagement’s core propositions are that: (1) we face an accelerating rate of change, involving challenges that can overwhelm our capacity as a society to adapt; (2) our system of governance is myopic about the longer-term future; (3) this approach is likely to bring severe costs to the nation; and (4) there are practical ways to remedy this deficiency. The Forward Engagement project has two goals: to draw the attention of experts and policy-makers to the multiple blind-spots we have regarding major longer-range contingencies; and to stimulate public interest in ways to improve our posture for dealing with them.

The April 7<sup>th</sup> conference was a first step towards engaging expert opinion. Its objective is to characterize some of the most important future contingencies of interest, focusing on those that have the potential to generate discontinuities – “social tsunamis.” A second conference this fall will translate these contingencies into issues that governance must confront, if we are to remain in command of events. The final conference, in the spring of 2007, will discuss ways to strengthen the capacity of democratic governance to cope with the intense compression and complexity of the events ahead.

Accordingly, the April 7th meeting was organized around three themes, each of which has a possible end-state that would qualify as a social tsunami:

- **Geopolitical Inversion**: Geo-economic power shifts massively and permanently to Asia, breaking the link between liberal democracy and economic primacy. Mr. Clyde Prestowitz, founder of the Economic Strategy Institute, introduced this subject.
- **Environmental Dislocation**: Rapid climate change breaks fundamental links between industrial civilization and nature. Dr. David Jhirad, Vice President of Science and Research at the World Resources Institute, introduced this subject.
- **Evolutionary Secession**: Science and technology give us control over our own evolutionary future through manipulation of genetics and by way of symbiosis with machine intelligence. Dr. William Bainbridge of the National Science Foundation introduced this subject.

These are seemingly quite disparate scenarios. However, they share certain characteristics which make them a set: all are potential consequences of trends that are gathering force; all of them are generating issues that need to be addressed with greater urgency in the immediate present; and all of them could come to full effect more or less concurrently. As scenarios, the “tsunamis” do not predict the future, but rather describe possible maximalist outcomes. It is seductively easy to tag worst-case scenarios as low-probability, and then to dismiss them. Such was the case when the world lived with the possibility of general nuclear war. But even those who thought nuclear war was a very

low-probability event nevertheless had to grapple with it as the most paramount of all contingencies.

The conference was about fast-moving, potentially very powerful forms of change. These trends and possible outcomes are individually worth our close attention. However, there is an additional element: the cumulative challenge to democratic governance that is presented by changes of such magnitude. Our system of governance was designed to be slow, in order to permit time for reflection, and to protect the opportunity for real debate. But that very quality of deliberateness puts democratic governance at risk in the face of unprecedented forms of rapid, complex change. The Forward Engagement project, funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and The George Washington University, is designed to focus attention on the need for strengthening the capacity of democratic governance to deal with profound change. The “tsunami” conference made the point that much is at stake: subsequent workshops and conferences will explore what can be done to help democratic governance meet the test.

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund and The George Washington University have been generous in their support of this effort. I am particularly appreciative that the President of George Washington University, Steven Joel Trachtenberg, appeared at the conference to greet participants and to show his support.

Thanks should also be recorded for the work of T. Neil Sroka, my research assistant, who contributed mightily to the organization and success of this conference.