

Forward Engagement: A New Wrinkle, in Time?

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U.S. governance is systemically myopic: it focuses on what is immediately before us, and defers action on what is coming next, regardless of how big or how fast those oncoming developments may be. The tempo of major events is accelerating, while lags of perception and response have diminished the capacity of government to react. Forward Engagement is a method for addressing this deficiency. It aims to identify major potential developments originating further in the future than we normally think about, and to assess policy responses early on in the belief that it would be more effective to engage the future sooner rather than later.

Americans typically believe that the future can be shaped by imagination and character. This was felt very strongly even when the United States was a smaller, weaker country whose future greatness was still only a premonition. It has become part of the national mythos in a period when U.S. material power seemingly gives the United States the means to impose our will on destiny. There is a cautionary tale involved here, since unbounded optimism at some point stumbles into hubris. That warning is important to keep in mind, precisely when considering whether and how to apply systematic foresight to the design of national policy.

The Acceleration of Change

The world and the events that shape it are a complex, interactive unity. That unity is not captured very well by any of the specialized conceptual systems we apply for the sake of academic rigor or administrative convenience. In general, it is not possible to accurately predict—much less design—the longer-range future, especially because our efforts to carry out grand plans alter the future from what it might otherwise have been. There is only one supreme law governing human affairs and that is the law of unintended consequences. And yet there is no escaping the responsibility for action, particularly on the part of those who aspire to lead the United States. Even non-action is a form of choice that will have consequences, and failure to act in time is tantamount to failure to act at all. If it is true that the incidence of major change is increasing, then time becomes the most precious resource of strategy.

In our system, a discussion about the nature of what is happening to us is in itself a political process that requires time. Time must be invested before alternative ideas of responses can be developed, and still more time before the most dominant of these ideas emerge at the end of extended debate. If the incidence of major events capable of shaping the international order is increasing, then we need to somehow gain for ourselves the time it takes to create public consensus, which is the only basis for extended, effective action. Just as it takes time for individuals to adjust to change, so it takes time for societies. We have seen in many parts of the world how, when change exceeds that capacity, the public

response begins to shift from politics to violence. Even in the United States, we must be mindful of this.

Ours is certainly not the first generation to sense an acceleration of events. If history was linear until the Industrial Revolution, it has been on a rising curve of change ever since. In the last two decades, the rate of change has become hyperbolic. The causal agent here is the explosive growth of computational capacity in terms of brute speed and networking. These factors drive change in all fields of activity dependent upon the computer—which effectively means ALL fields of activity—at rates that challenge human powers of psychological adaptation, not to mention the capacity of our political institutions to influence outcomes.

We can see this force at work in the process of globalization, whereby the economic system has become more global than national. We can see it at work in the emergence of genetics as a tool capable of changing the evolutionary course of our species. We can see it at work in the growth of systems of increasingly intelligent computer systems in ever growing competition with human skills. All of these changes may bestow great blessings, but not without a price. These changes, moreover, are not restricted to the domain of material things, but are engaging values at the core of our consciousness as individuals and as societies—and ultimately at the level of our spirituality.

We cannot afford to find ourselves in the position of discussing our best options as lost chances: what might have been; what ought to have been; what can no longer be. But if we do not make a concentrated effort to anticipate major change, then the chances for effective action diminish from small to infinitesimal. The implications of failure are very important for liberal democracies. Governments that arrive with too little, too late, will consistently fail to provide the public with meaningful options to impose choice on the shape of the future. The consequence would be growing public disbelief in the efficacy of democratic governance.

No one can accurately forecast or design the future, but ignoring it until it has largely materialized is not smart policy. If we don't change, moreover, the United States may miss its best opportunities to influence the future.

Here and there one can find “search-engines” for future policy in the federal government. The Department of Defense operates a number of such systems, with the Quadrennial Review perhaps the best known: it is an important policymaking tool, but focused on determining requirements for military forces. The State Department's Bureau of Policy Planning is supposed to think in the longer-term, but has a very uneven record of doing so. The Central Intelligence Agency in recent years has created a rolling process for looking at the longer-range future, but its work excludes domestic developments and avoids making policy recommendations. Congress at one time or another has tried to develop mechanisms that would couple foresight to policy, such as the “Clearinghouse of the Future” and the much better known Office of Technological Assessment. But these efforts have been extinguished. The fact is that the U.S. government does not have any steady-state mechanism for maintaining an integrative look at the longer-term future and assessing its meaning for public policy.

Forward Engagement in Theory and Practice

Forward Engagement was originally intended to augment government procedures by providing a comprehensive, future-oriented approach to policy analysis. While the opportunity for doing so is not at hand, for the time being Forward Engagement serves another useful purpose, which is as a method for teaching students of public policy. One day some of these students may have the opportunity to apply Forward Engagement towards its original purposes.

The process of presenting Forward Engagement in the classroom is meant to suggest its method of operation in the real world. Students move through a four-part sequence in the course of a semester. They apply forecasting methodologies to search for what they consider to be major potential developments in four fields: science and technology; security; economics; and governance. The students look for interactions among these categories, consider the implications of these developments for policy, and finally assess ways to improve the institutional capacity of government to handle these issues on an ongoing basis.

Each new class inherits and is encouraged to draw upon the conclusions reached by its predecessors. The effect is to create an institutional memory and to form a kind of ongoing culture. But each class begins its work completely free to accept, modify, or reject the findings of its predecessors. In any event, there is always a flow of new information that must be absorbed: perceptions as to what is or is not a major future contingency vary; insights into how these trends interact are different; and opinions regarding appropriate policy evolve. Thus far, each class has also come forward with its own, unique proposal for creating an institutional system for Forward Engagement, ranging from adjuncts to the National Security Council to free standing commissions mandated by law.

Insights from the Classroom

Over time, successive classes have reached certain very basic conclusions about the nature of Forward Engagement as a process. First among these insights is the knowledge that there is no single model of the future, and no single set of policy conclusions that can be accepted as definitive. In the real world, it is important to recognize the distinction between the value of a single plan and the process of planning itself. Single plans can be extremely important, but all are subject to limitations in our ability to comprehend inherently chaotic events. Planning, for this very reason, is an essentially ongoing activity. It follows that any system for planning must be consciously designed to ensure against entrenched opinion. In the classroom, the normal rotation of students has this effect. In actuality, it would be important to provide for the rotation of participants in an institutionalized process, and for a culture of inquiry based on broad consultation among experts outside as well as inside government.

Forward Engagement demands that we disregard the barriers that are normally respected between the study of domestic policy and foreign affairs. These barriers are artifacts of an earlier time when life in the United States was much less subject to influence by developments abroad. Even though we have realized that the distinction no longer holds, both the academic world and that of governance are still largely organized as if these subjects can be thought of as functionally unrelated.

Forward Engagement requires that we dispense with the illusion that while the rest of the world is in flux, the United States remains a stable point of reference. In fact, we are changing as rapidly if not even more so than many other parts of the world, as even a cursory glance at the last census will show. Shifts in age distribution, ethnicity, and in occupation by gender all portend deep changes yet to come in the political priorities of the U.S. public, whether directed toward domestic or external concerns. These cannot fail to interact with challenges from the longer-term future in ways that undermine any comfortable assumptions about how Americans will visualize their role in the world at large.

Forward Engagement encourages alertness towards compound or nodal interactions between developments in fields that are most often treated as separate subjects. For example, seemingly domestic issues—such as the educational level of the population, energy infrastructure, or the efficient delivery of healthcare—all relate not only to the domestic economic and social strength of the United States, but to the ability of the United States to be a proactive force for growth and stability in the world at large. At the same time, the demographics of the European Union, Russia, Japan, India, and China will strongly influence not only domestic political affairs within each of these entities, but the geopolitical relationships among them—and between these countries and the United States.

Finally, the rate of technical change will have profound consequences for rates of change in all areas of human endeavor. A technological breakthrough such as the appearance of so-called “quantum computers,” for example, would fundamentally alter the nature of inquiry about all forms of complex interactions, from global climate patterns to protein folding.

Policy Recommendations

Nothing is as misleading as the straight-line extrapolation of any trend, no matter how well that trend may seem to be established. Forward Engagement exploits all methodologies for probing the future, but attempts to avoid becoming permanently convinced by any single method. Forward Engagement is particularly well suited for the use of multiple scenarios as a way to test out a broad spectrum of possible futures interacting with adaptive human behavior.

Forward Engagement demands new methods for executing policy. The standard approach is to determine policy on a one-time basis, and then to assign responsibility for its execution to a particular bureaucratic institution. Things are left to run on autopilot, until such time as the accumulating gap between expectations and reality becomes too great to ignore by virtue of mounting social, economic, or security costs. At the time policies are founded, so too should standards be established for monitoring consequences, the sooner to recognize the need for adjustment or even radical change. Too often, once policies have been devised and set in motion, the search for evidence of failure is more a matter for the opposition than for those in power. By locking ourselves into failing policies in this manner, we ensure that correction for error does not occur until the costs are unbearable. Sooner or later even correct policy outlives the period of its validity. Wise governance requires a continuing process for monitoring the actual consequences of policy and readiness to adapt to the facts.

Finally, Forward Engagement is impossible to imagine in our system of government unless it extends to the operations of Congress. At present, Congress is an

eighteenth-century institution trying to contend with the twenty-first century. An assessment of the distribution of power between the Executive and Congress leaves little doubt that the latter is slipping. There are a number of reasons for this, but among the most important is the fact that Congress as an institution has no means to develop even the broadest consensus as to what the future holds for us or what we ought to be able to do about it. Instead of thoughtful vision and discourse, we have only the clash of parties.

The Congress is anything but an institution whose time is past. On the contrary, it has vital functions and when these are not well executed, the nation suffers. The 9/11 Commission Report provides a dramatic example of how important a future-oriented frame of reference is for Congress. According to the Commission, Congress failed in its task of overseeing the operations of the intelligence community, thereby allowing bad practices to lead to bad results. It is well and good that Congressional committees scurried to hold hearings into the causes of intelligence failure regarding the events of 11 September or Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. But these exercises in post-mortem analysis have uncovered very little that might not have been known in advance had Congress been thinking ahead and fully exercising its authorities.

The dynamics of political leadership and of the competition for power make the future a hard sell. To speak of real action on behalf of the longer-term future is to talk of reallocating finite resources away from urgent present goals, and that immediately mobilizes all those who want those resources kept where they are. Talk about the future is plentiful, but the willingness is rare to run significant political risks on its behalf. Those leaders who do take on this cause often find themselves penalized rather than rewarded in their political lives. If this were not so, we would provide for social security and healthcare on the basis of foresight, not because we are in the shadow of the financial collapse of the basic safety-net systems. We would provide for education, culture, and environment as long-term investments of the most essential kind.

The acceleration of events means that the penalties that society incurs for delayed action are felt sooner and harder than in the past. There may be some poetic justice involved if the generation that thinks it is deferring problems to the next generation discovers that its aim was too short. It is therefore not too much to hope that wise leaders may agree on the need to establish procedures in government that quickly recognize the onset of the unexpected in order to provide the greatest possible amount of time in which to consider timely responses. Forward Engagement is an effort to develop this approach: it declares that complex insight can be learned, and that if it can be learned it can also be practiced.

Conclusion

Forward Engagement is not the only concept for bridging the gap between short-term and long-term action. Other institutions such as RAND, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Center for Strategic International Studies, and the Center for the Study of the Presidency are pursuing this idea in different forms under different names. The common denominators among these efforts are, first, confidence that our ability to analyze the future is gradually improving through improved modeling, game theory, and simulation; and second, that we urgently need to bring these abilities to bear on illuminating and debating public policy. Working together, we may be able to

agree on specific ongoing actions that we can take to promote recognition that the longer-term future has become an inescapable responsibility of governance in the present.