

Book Review

Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wild Cards in Global Politics* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2007)

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Summary

Blindside is a rich examination of the complexities involved in predicting and preparing for strategic surprises illuminated by pertinent case studies of past event as well as possible future outcomes across the political, technological, economic, and biological arenas.



The book seeks to illuminate policy choices available to American policy makers to deal with ‘low probability and high impact’ events like the September 11, 2001 attacks or the destruction of the former Soviet Union and the issues which prevent them from ‘seeing the writing on the wall’ as it were, in being better prepared to deal with such eventualities. Pointing out institutional as well as personal failures of key decision-makers that prevent full capacities from being utilised, they urge scenario building and cost-benefit analysis among other tools to help make better choices. The importance of technology is also pointed out, given that it drives much of economic and political change. Factors which militate against better preparation include the low probability of such events happening, the short-life of political careers, and ‘pressure of the immediate’, among others. The book discusses different case studies, including past instances of failure to anticipate events like the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, as well as potential future cases of surprise like a biological event. It then examines the importance of forecasting, and concludes by an examination of the complexities in thinking through these and related issues.

Bruce Berkowitz in his chapter ‘US Intelligence Estimates of Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception’ discounts the widely held view that US intelligence community was ‘blindsided’ and failed to anticipate the Soviet collapse. Instead, he shows that US intelligence provided long-range as well as shorter-range warnings about aspects such as a slowdown in the Soviet economy and a rapidly constricting choice of options for a Soviet leadership. Berkowitz points out that an intentional political decision better explains the Bush administration’s policy of continuing its support to Gorbachev rather than an intelligence failure. David Hale in ‘Econoshocks’ points out that monetary excesses resulting from incomplete information as well as poor monitoring of systemic risk by international organisations like the IMF led to the East Asian economic crisis. Almost prophetically, the author notes that given the excesses in the ‘old

industrial countries', 'the next major shocks to the global financial system are more likely to come from North America, Europe ...'

William Bonvillian examines the role and contribution of DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) and the continued importance of such an innovation organisation to sustain America's national power. Gal Luft and Ann Korin examine the complexities arising out of the strategic importance of oil as well as due to attacks by groups inimical to multi-nationals extracting the resource from regions such as the Niger Delta. They note that with 10 per cent of the world's oil reserves, the Iranian regime seems unfazed by the prospects of tougher sanctions. China's and India's dependence on oil also complicates US foreign policy choices in dealing with countries such as Iran. The chapter goes on to examine the possibility of alternate fuels like ethanol or electric vehicles to reduce American dependence on foreign oil. They conclude by noting that the 'shift from an oil-based economy to a fuel-based economy' is both 'practical and economical' for America. Scott Barrett in 'Emerging Infectious Diseases: Are we Prepared?' urges 'global and offensive' measures to be better prepared to deal with emerging infectious diseases rather than unilateral or defensive measures. Barrett specifically urges action in the five areas of prevention, preparedness, surveillance, reporting and response. He notes that revisions to International Health Regulations (IHR) do little to address the fundamental weaknesses in the current system of ensuring security against the spread of diseases. Urging stricter global standards, Barrett calls upon richer countries to more actively participate in ensuring the development of the poorer states so that the conditions that give rise to new pathogens – poor sanitation, weak public health systems, among other deficiencies can be dealt with more effectively.

Part III of the book deals with the issue of Forecasting and the imperative need to be 'ahead of the curve' in a 'world of surprises'. Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall define strategic surprise as 'patterns of events that, if they were to occur, would make a big difference to the future, force decision makers

to challenge their own assumptions of how the world works, and require hard choices today.' They note that anticipating strategic surprises can give enormous advantages to decision-makers. They urge organisations/decision-makers to be imaginative and systematic to detect surprises, put in place 'multiple filters' to gather information, process the filtered information effectively, focus not just on the events but on the contexts with in which those events are occurring, not be in denial about alternative scenarios, and put in place sensors to detect strategic surprise as they unfold.

Robert Lempert in 'Can Scenarios help Policymakers' urges American policy makers to be both bold and careful in dealing with a complicated world. He notes that scenarios can help decision makers 'overcome the psychological and organisational barriers that make it difficult to manage surprise' by expanding the diversity of possible futures. Scenarios for the author provide a 'powerful concept for focussing attention on the unexpected' and tools like information technology can 'enhance the systematic evaluation of surprise'.

Part IV of the book includes discussion among some practitioners and thinkers on the issues at hand, including by the Editorial Board members of American Interest. James Kurth for instance notes that the spectre of WMD attack on the United States – either by nuclear or biological weapons is quite serious an issue but one from which American society 'would be able to recover fairly soon'. He points out that WMD, barbarian enemy (Islamic fundamentalism) and demographic decline – three factors which are acting in conjunction, can cause great damage. Gregg Easterbrook on the other hand argues that 'positive' objective trends in the world like the sharp absence of war, non-occurrence of Malthusian or plague catastrophes, limited or absence of use of chemical or biological weapons in warfare, good economic growth, rising global equality, abundance of primary resources including that of oil, among other factors are a cause for optimism. Niall Fergusson urges greater focus on high probability high impact (HPHI) events like an Avian Flu virus or a computer virus that could shut down Google rather than

on low probability high impact (LPHI) events. The worldwide swing to the political left for Fergusson is another HPHI event that analysts are ignoring. Walter Russell Mead points out that society gradually gets better at mastering change and some of them do it better than others. He also dismisses the possibility of Fergusson's 'global left' having much influence in America and instead points to the increasing influence of religion in dealing with the complexities of modern American life. Mead notes that Rick Warren's (founder of an evangelical church group) *The Purpose Driven Life* is the biggest hard cover selling book in American history. Ruth Wedgwood notes that because capital will flee if it is taxed too hard, the 'fate of American labour has become a Malthusian one'. She talks of 'cyber-nations' where territory does not matter any more even as at the other end of the spectrum, immigration becomes a controversial issue due to competitive labour dynamics. Anne Applebaum posits the end of the 'American world' and a sharp decline of American power. Bernard-Henry Levi on the other hand points out that America continues to be creative and that American institutions are the 'soundest' in the world. Eliot Chen urges a rethink on the possible utility of American power if it remains dominant two decades from now on. Fukuyama concludes by noting that three fundamental reasons why people/societies are unprepared to deal with unexpected are the nature of human cognition, poor or missing incentives to prepare, and lack of institutions necessary to guard against such events.

The book is a rich examination of the complexities involved in predicting and preparing for strategic surprises illuminated by rich case studies of past and possible future events across political, technological, economic, and biological fields. Given that the book is an outcome of a programme sponsored by the American Interest magazine, it is not surprising that the analysis is mostly geared in terms of implications for the US. A similar exercise setting out various policy choices for India on account of changes in demographics, technology, and regional geo-politics among other relevant aspects over a 20 year time period will be useful and illuminating.