

Pursuing the Future of the United States

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Converging trends strongly suggest that the world – and our country – are about to experience the greatest change and disruption known in our history. The next half dozen years will likely see rapid, global climate change coupled with the beginning of the end of the petroleum era and a reorganization of the planetary energy regime, a major shock to the global financial system, unprecedented food prices, and the growing possibility of wild card events such as a bird flu pandemic.

In the face of such change, *any* new president will be hard pressed to succeed in guiding our country through the minefield that appears to be in our path. But, the task will be impossible without a significant change in the way we pursue the future. Many of our problems are the direct result of how we presently see ourselves, our nation, and the world. Those must change. As the old adage suggests: If we keep doing what we have been doing, we'll keep getting what we have been getting.

To safely negotiate this extraordinary global reorganization and allow a new world and new human to emerge, the next President will need to:

1. Develop a clear, sophisticated vision for the U.S. and the world for 2018

Responses to the unprecedented change that we are likely to experience in the next decade will necessarily be fragmented and incoherent without a clear, overarching sense of a) what is happening to this planet and humanity at this time, b) what the potential implications might be, c) what big options are available to us, and, considering all of this, d) who and what we want to be in ten years. This vision – a mental picture – must be easy to communicate so that it can be understood and embraced by the millions of people who will have to contribute to achieving the vision.

That vision then needs to drive all major governmental decisions made in the next four years.

2. Reduce Fear

Humans are disempowered when they're afraid. We don't think effectively and solve problems as we could. The present administration's response to the problems of the day has been one of responding from fear and sowing fear throughout our citizenry. The fear of what someone might do to us has allowed Americans to give up to their government an intrusion into their lives that would have been unthinkable and unconscionable for most of our country's history. This state of fear is continually encouraged by the present administration, with threat levels, random searches, unlimited communications monitoring, and many other public initiatives.

We will not rise to the occasion of effectively dealing with the problems on our horizon if we are frozen in fear. American's must be called to greatness – not told to be afraid.

3. Foster Innovation

The extraordinary need for new ideas and solutions from all levels of society must underpin all of our policies. We must unleash and loose the constraints on our most creative people.

We must allow ideas to flow and interactions to proliferate. The present policy is toward increasing constraints and intrusions on air travel, the media, the Internet, reductions on funding for science and research, education that rewards test scores rather than new ideas, and an entertainment sector that seems to be constantly searching for the lowest common denominator possible.

We must not allow the influence and interests of large commercial entities, who are fundamentally against the instability and uncertainty that attends a highly innovative environment, to dampen the most basic need of our nation for new ideas and products. We must foster the environment that encourages individuals and small groups to create and invent.

4. Rapidly Build Resilience and Community

The future will be disruptive on a scale that is greater than anything that any humans now alive have ever experienced. To weather the coming storms we will need for our systems to be redundant, our emergency services to be effective, alternative supply chains to be in place, and neighbors to have built extended networks of trusted relationships so that they are not only willing to help each other but know what to do. At its essence, this resilience requires community and preparation. Even if it turns out that we are not tried to the extent that it appears we will be, the emergence of strong communities would produce many substantial, positive benefits.

5. Develop a Foresight Capability

The change ahead will increase exponentially. There will be less and less time to both anticipate and respond to the inevitable shocks. Without a sophisticated capability to foresee potentially disruptive future events, every such experience will be a surprise. Without a foresight capability, instead of having positioned ourselves to defend against or derail the incoming disruption we are destined to react after the blow with much higher costs. New technical capabilities have been developed and are on the drawing boards that could provide a robust national surprise anticipation capability. The U.S. must develop this.

6. Move Toward Cooperation

Our world that is becoming increasingly more interconnected and interdependent. Coincidentally, more complex, destructive technical capabilities are being developed such that the influence of a single empowered individual is greater than it has ever been in history. A smart, knowledgeable malcontent could now destroy our whole social and economic system.

This escalating global complexity and interdependency married with more destructive power available to very small groups means that the concept of competition, as it has been taught and practiced throughout recorded history, is rapidly becoming self-destructive behavior that threatens society and country.

The solution is cooperation – to learn how to get along and resolve conflicts peacefully rather than through violence. Understanding this new dynamic and its implications and the need for developing new formalized approaches to engaging other groups and our environment are now at a critical state. We must do this soon.