

Expecting the Unexpected

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FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, ed., *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wild Cards in Global Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 198pp.

Over the past few decades, forcing events, strategic surprises and wild cards have exacted a heavy toll. The near-instantaneousness of Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and some natural disasters—as well as the “slow surprise” of HIV/AIDS, which circled the globe for nearly fifty years before being recognized as a pandemic—all serve as examples of the certainty of uncertainty in global politics.

Yet, until recently, when the U.S. was blindsided by such low probability high impact (LPHI) events, there was little debate about how governments could prepare for similar future occurrences. “Acts of God,” as they are often dubbed, have historically been deemed both unstoppable and impractical to plan for.

Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wild Cards in Global Politics is an insightful and thought-provoking effort to engage—and to predict—the problems faced by decisionmakers and analysts confronted by uncertainty. It is also an attempt to offer some sound suggestions on what may practically be done to prepare ourselves for future such events. This contribution to the growing literature on the nature and impact of

LPHI uncertainties comes at a welcome time, given the varied nature of looming potential threats we face: WMD attacks on cities, catastrophic climate change fallout, or even mass destruction caused by an asteroid’s hitting Earth, among others explored by the authors.

Edited by Francis Fukuyama, *Blindside* features such high-profile contributors as Anne Applebaum, Eliot Cohen, Josef Joffe, Walter Russell Mead and Itamar Rabinovich. It begins by offering a theoretical framework explaining why anticipating and preparing for blindside events has historically proven so difficult.

The first problem has to do with getting present-day decisionmakers, faced with a host of quotidian exigencies, to take seriously certain potential LPHI events. If told some potentially catastrophic event has a low probability of occurring, officials tend to do little or nothing—even if such an event would prove catastrophic, should it take place. The difficulty of convincing decisionmakers that a surprise is even possible, much less getting them to imagine what can be done in response, is even more difficult when such scenarios challenge conventional wisdom.

Second, even if this first hurdle is overcome, the investment needed to hedge against LPHI events is expensive. Since policymakers, financiers and politicians—particularly those on



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two- and four-year election cycles—are under great psychological and institutional pressure to maximize the impact of their limited resources for near-term gains, the case for allocating resources for low-probability catastrophes is a hard sell.

The third difficulty derives from the fact that decisionmakers tend to be biased in one direction or another, depending upon their profession. A crucial causal factor underlying the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, for example, was a widely held false sense of security generated by high returns and market confidence, which lulled investors into complacency regarding basic economic fundamentals. In the U.S., this optimistic bias is aided by the moral hazard of government policies which allow financial institutions to fully benefit from profitable markets while enjoying protection from too hard a fall should things not work out as hoped. This view is also found among politicians, who express a bias toward optimism and confidence when faced with ambiguity, downplaying risks they cannot control and portraying risks as nothing more than challenges to be overcome through skill and determination.

Conversely, pessimistic worldviews are often held by government bureaucrats, particularly those working in national security positions. There, accurately predicting positive events largely goes unrewarded while failing to anticipate negative developments is punished, particularly by Congress and the press. Perhaps no other organization is as institutionally prone to such biases as the intelligence community, which harbors a very human tendency—masterfully elucidated some years ago in Roberta Wohlstetter's landmark book *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*—to find intelligence consistent with pre-

vailing worldviews, cognitive biases, long-held mental models and self-interest. These cognitive frailties prevent early recognition of blindsides events with consequences encapsulated by George Orwell's observation that "sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on the battlefield."

Fourth, even if decisionmakers decide that something must be done to head off LPHI catastrophes, the act of preparing for such events—much less allocating resources to deal with them—potentially exposes them to ridicule and lost votes. As the authors point out, over the past 20 years many "well-known commissions" predicted that terrorists would attack the World Trade Center again, airplanes could be used as weapons, and Osama bin Laden would orchestrate attacks on the symbols of U.S. power. But politicians and bureaucrats responsible for such matters predictably focused their attention elsewhere rather than expend limited resources to prevent some unlikely future catastrophe.

Finally, this negative incentive structure is compounded by the probability that even if a particular LPHI event is planned for, and action is taken ahead of time to head it off, no political credit will be forthcoming. If President Bush had invaded Afghanistan to prevent 9/11 before it happened and destroyed al-Qaeda, the U.S. would likely be even more ridiculed internationally, while voters, egged on by Congress, would likely seek retribution at the polls for the Administration's warmongering. The end result is a type of "tragedy of the commons" effect, where no planning is usually done.

From there—with the use of case studies as diverse as national security, finance, energy, and health—the book moves on to focus on recom-

mendations for planning for, and mitigating the fallout from, blindsided events if and when they occur. The volume's conclusions are clear and helpful. LPHI events—particularly strategic surprises—often exhibit recognizable signs, may be identified before they arise, and thus mitigated as long as appropriate resources are expended throughout the process.

These findings should be heartening for officials in Washington. They suggest that, despite the myriad challenges involved in doing so, getting decisionmakers to focus on—and plan for—blindsided events could help make them not so unexpected after all.



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