



PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

Thinking About the Unthinkable

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON

This month I want to give a shout-out for a 2009 book that still provides provocative perspectives on international affairs and diplomacy: *The Age of the Unthinkable – Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do About It* by Joshua Cooper Ramo. Ramo, who serves as managing director of Kissinger Associates, was co-chair of the Santa Fe Institute's first working group on Complexity and International Affairs and is a co-founder of the U.S.-China Young Leaders Forum.

My intent is not to review his book here, but to use it as a call for each of us to take up his challenge to “think deeply about the forces now violently reordering the globe, and to try to change the corporations where we work.” By this he means thinking about redesigning our national security agencies, including the State Department, on the basis of a different approach from the one we have pursued for the past 50 or 60 years.

Here are a few of his propositions: We are in a “revolutionary era of surprise and innovation” and need to learn to think and act like revolutionaries. Instead, the “suits working in the NSC or the U.S. Army or IBM or Time Warner



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are locked ... in a vision of the world that is out of date and inflexible.” Trust that our leaders understand or tell the truth about what we are confronting is “leaching away,” and “the sum of their misconceptions has produced a tragic paradox: policies designed to make us safer instead make the world more perilous.”

Ramo worries that the “most likely course for our future is the most dangerous: minor adjustments to policy and ... incremental changes to institutions that are already collapsing.” In his view, the “only hope of guaranteeing human rights and moral decency ... is radical new language and thought.” .. “In a revolutionary age, with rapid change, our architects’ tools are deadly — it is time to put them down” and instead to begin to “live and think as gardeners.”

The author’s background in complexity theory and international relations underpins his concept of “deep security.” This is based on “a way of seeing, thinking and acting that takes the best ideas from the playbook or revolutionary forces and combines them with the demands and responsibilities that established power places on us.” Deep security “functions like an immune system — always ready, capable of dealing with the unexpected and as dynamic as the world itself.”

Ramo calls for “ceaseless reform and innovation” to begin immediately to develop “a new architecture of financial, environmental and national security institutions built with fresh language and stocked with new minds.” In other words, Ramo is not only, like Nietzsche, pronouncing the demise of an old order. He is calling on foreign affairs professionals to think in new ways, to address the gathering challenges and to develop a more dynamic and intense diplomacy.

You may agree or disagree with these propositions or Ramo’s analysis of how the world is changing, or why that a transformation of existing institutions is necessary and inevitable. But the important question he raises is: How can America come out a winner in the new game?

I would like to see new thinking and new language come from our own ranks, as well. AFSA offers a mechanism for gathering and conveying these ideas to management in a purposeful manner.

What would be the impact if books like this became a common touchstone for A-100 classes or mid-level professional development courses? The point is not whether any one book defines “truth” but, rather, whether it provokes us as professionals to think, debate and search for it.

Let me know what you think at President@afsa.org. ■