

Outlook

We can't prevent  
tomorrow's catastrophes  
unless we imagine them  
today



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Illustration by Zoe van Dijk  
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he Trump administration may be gone, but

**T** Trumpian chaos persists. Which is why, before he took office, Joe Biden repeatedly emphasized his intention to battle multiple crises simultaneously: a “health crisis,” an “economic crisis,” a “racial justice crisis” and a “climate crisis.” In his inaugural address, the president said, “This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge.” And if a crisis is a situation that demands immediate action, it is true: We must act immediately on all of these things.



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But if an emergency isn't resolvable in the short term, it can be counterproductive to characterize it as one. It is not — or not only — a crisis. It is a condition.

The distinction is not trivial: We deal with the critical differently than we deal with the chronic. Crises focus us on the present, demanding swift action, while conditions force us to look to the future because they require strategy sustained over time. The pandemic, the economy, the climate and racial strife are both crises and conditions, demanding not just short-term management but long-term rethinking — operations and planning, response and anticipation, acting in the present and thinking of the future.

The U.S. government is horrible at this sort of temporal ambidexterity. Policymakers tend to see the present and the future as locked in a zero-sum time war, where attention to “later” reduces attention to “now,” and vice versa. The present almost always wins, because the gains from



success — and the costs of failure — are immediate and concrete. By contrast, the consequences of not adequately managing the future are far-off, uncertain and abstract (and often a problem for another administration). Crises only magnify this dynamic, making the present loom even larger than usual.

To its credit, the Biden administration has linked fast action to broader goals: The president's [interim national security strategy](#) and early executive orders emphasize climate change, and his [pandemic response](#) includes long-term investments in public health infrastructure. As it puts out fires, the Biden team is also rethinking fire safety. Which is good.

Unless the next crisis has nothing to do with fire.

If the events of the past year have demonstrated anything, it is the uncertainty of the future. Which means that, for Biden to succeed, simply having a strategy will not suffice. Even in calmer times, the future rarely holds still for our plans, and in a dynamic environment (see: 2021), there is every chance that unimagined problems will arise, that our current challenges will have unexpected effects and that our solutions will have unintended consequences. In such an environment we need more than strategy. We need strategic foresight.

Strategic foresight — which I study as a researcher and practice as a consultant — involves envisioning alternative futures to better sense, shape and adapt to the one that is emerging. It is a flexible way of managing uncertainty. Tools like scenario planning are used widely, if inconsistently, in business and government, yet

the White House does not have a dedicated strategic-foresight function. Even though it is rapidly making high-stakes, difficult-to-reverse decisions that will have long-term effects, the U.S. government has no coordinated mechanism for imagining what those effects might be.

If we don't change that, we'll always be battling surprise with spontaneity. By contrast, when we spend more time asking, "What if?," we can spend less time asking, "What now?"



Power lines in Lake Charles, La., were damaged last August when Hurricane Laura, a Category 4 storm, battered the city. Government officials have routinely neglected to think long-term about infrastructure, extreme weather and climate change. (Erin Trieb for The Washington Post)

**I**n Washington, the urgent has long been the enemy of the important, and simply getting policymakers to think about the long term — let alone to grapple with its inherent uncertainty — is a nearly insurmountable challenge. There are too many forces, from the

tempo of the electoral cycle to the tyranny of the inbox to the crush of social media, conspiring to prioritize the present.

But the costs are increasingly stark.

Infrastructure Week may have [been a joke](#) during the Trump administration, but there is nothing funny about our perennial failure to shore up the physical foundations of the economy, from roads to railways to power lines — an underinvestment that [will cost](#) trillions in lost productivity over the coming years. That neglect was on stark display just weeks ago as Texas and other states [succumbed](#) to blackouts, paralysis and dirty drinking water because of a winter storm.

Extreme weather events are themselves [related](#) to the government's failure to address climate change, perhaps the epitome of short-termism. The [plunge in funding](#) for basic science research is another shortcoming. Today, the federal government spends less on research and development than it has [in six decades](#). Given the contribution that scientific discovery makes to economic growth — the National Institutes of Health's Human Genome Project [has generated](#) \$178 for every dollar spent on it (or nearly \$1 trillion in economic growth) — the country will have shortchanged generations of Americans.

This myopia has national security implications. China may soon overtake the United States in [investment in emerging technologies](#) — from artificial intelligence to battery storage to quantum computing. Although business has made up for the research shortfall to some extent, the Council on Foreign Relations [notes](#) that “only the government can make the type of investments in

basic science that ignite discoveries; such investments are too big and risky for any single private enterprise to undertake.”

This absence of long-term thinking on national security is ironic given the field’s [pretensions](#) to “grand strategy,” wasteful given the [\\$1.25 trillion](#) we spend each year on defense and bizarrely persistent given that practitioners have recognized the dangers of short-termism since the opening days of the Cold War. In 1947, George C. Marshall established the policy planning staff as a separate entity within the State Department, enjoining its first director, legendary Sovietologist George Kennan, to “avoid trivia.” As Dean Acheson would later [recall](#), the office’s goal was to look “beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them.”

Unfortunately, these efforts fell short. In 1949, Kennan quit, [writing](#) in his diary, “It is time I recognized that my Policy Planning Staff, started nearly three years ago, has simply been a failure, like all previous attempts to bring order and foresight into the designing of foreign policy by special institutional arrangements.” He realized that as soon as anticipatory efforts were divorced from operations, they became irrelevant — operations would always dominate.

That dominance has persisted for decades. (“At the end of the day government is an operational enterprise. It is not a university,” as Richard Haass, one of Kennan’s more recent successors, [put it](#).) But the dynamic leaves policymakers in a bind: To formulate strategy, one has to step back

from operations, but as soon as the connection with operations is broken, strategy has no impact. As John Gans, the author of “[White House Warriors](#),” said, “The Catch-22 is that those who try to focus on the long term risk sacrificing the influence needed to sell any new ideas to their principals by not spending all their time worried about the short term.”

Postwar U.S. foreign policy is littered with disastrous failures to anticipate the consequences of our actions. The CIA overthrew the democratically elected Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran, only to fuel the popular resentment that eventually erupted in the 1979 Islamic revolution. We [supplied](#) the mujahideen with weapons to fight off the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only to create a power vacuum that was subsequently filled by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. We “liberated” Iraq, only to be met with a virulent insurgency. And when we withdrew from that country in 2011, we left behind not the functioning democracy we had promised, but a failed state and a staging ground for the Islamic State.

Simply thinking more about the long term is no guarantee of foresight. “Key movers in the Bush administration did think long term, but about the wrong things,” Richard Fontaine, head of the Center for a New American Security, pointed out with respect to Iraq: “The potential for a democratic Iraq to spread its political system to other Middle East autocracies, making the region ultimately more democratic, less ridden by terrorists, and better for both the U.S. and people in the region. Their failure was in not thinking about and planning for the other, less attractive scenarios, which were much likelier.”



A related mistake nearly led to apocalypse during the Cold War. In September 1962, the CIA dismissed the idea that the Soviets would put nuclear missiles in Cuba because Sherman Kent, then the agency's chief forecaster, could not imagine that they would do something so risky. Similarly, Ronald Reagan did not entertain the possibility that his early confrontational approach to the Soviet Union was dangerously provocative, because he could not imagine that anyone saw the United States as anything but "good." Yet newly declassified documents [suggest](#) that his behavior so frightened Moscow that a 1983 NATO military exercise [could have triggered](#) a nuclear war.

Imagination — the ability to generate alternatives, challenge assumptions and take the perspective of others — is a key strategic resource for navigating the uncertainty of the future. As the 9/11 Commission [wrote](#) in its assessment of the government's failure to anticipate the 2001 terrorist attacks: "The most important failure was one of imagination."



A U.S. Coast Guard boat cruises through New York Harbor in 2018. The Coast Guard's scenario-planning exercises in the late 1990s helped the service more effectively respond to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

**I**magining different futures makes us question what's important in the present, what the future may bring and how we might shape it. Scenario planners do that by identifying forces of change that are likely to have a significant but uncertain impact. Juxtaposing those forces allows them to create stories of future “worlds” that are plausible but unfamiliar. They speculate how such worlds might emerge given current events, spotlighting important developments that are otherwise overshadowed by constant crisis. And the process helps leaders perform what you might call “cognitive advance work”: Having considered the potential for surprise, leaders find themselves more adaptable if it strikes.

In the late 1990s, Coast Guard officials conducted a scenario-planning [exercise](#) examining four

potential forces of change, including “threats to U.S. society” and “demand for maritime services.” They described what the world might look like in 20 years given different configurations of those variables, and they asked what strategies would best position the service for the broadest range of futures.

In one of the “worlds” they envisioned, “Terrorism strikes frequently and increasingly close to home.” The Coast Guard did not predict the 9/11 attacks, but it responded more adeptly because its leaders had already thought about what they should do in such a world. For example, the Coast Guard immediately assumed leadership of an interagency process that developed a post-attack strategy to achieve full “maritime domain awareness” — the ability to track all vessels approaching the United States by sea — having realized the importance of such a capability several years earlier.

Corporations have used scenario planning since the 1970s, when Royal Dutch Shell [famously developed](#) the method and managed to escape the OPEC oil embargo relatively unscathed. Since then, a diverse set of companies — from [Rolls-Royce](#) to [Schneider Electric](#) to [Salesforce](#) — have relied on it, showing that attention to the future increases, not decreases, the ability to act in the present. And today, because of pandemic-related uncertainty, “scenarios are back in fashion,” [according to](#) management consulting giant McKinsey & Company.

There are [pockets of strategic foresight](#) throughout the U.S. government — in the Secret Service, the [Government Accountability Office](#), the [Office of Personnel Management](#), the [Forest](#)

Service, the [Agency for International Development](#) and various parts of the Defense Department, including the [Office of Net Assessment](#), the [Army Mad Scientist Laboratory](#) and the [Air Force's futures directorate](#). (I do some foresight work with the Air Force.) But these pockets are scattered. Often, as with the [National Intelligence Council's "Global Trends" report](#), efforts to imagine possible futures are disconnected from policy. The institutional problem Kennan identified 70 years ago persists.

The way to surmount that challenge is for the president himself to make strategic foresight a priority. The precise organizational form that the effort takes — whether a new directorate to staff the National Security Council, a White House Office of Foresight or an entity like the President's Intelligence Advisory Board — is less important than having a receptive ear in the Oval Office. As Michèle Flournoy, who served as Barack Obama's undersecretary of defense for policy, put it, "You need a president and a national security adviser who see value in this and who are going to make time on their calendars." The result would be a "low-cost, high-value" way to "look over the horizon and try to anticipate what's coming ... and [it] might give them a much broader and more effective set of options to engage early, rather than waiting until it hits them in the face and it's a crisis."

Biden has called for the reimagination of national security, but what we need is something grander — a reimagination of the role of imagination. As the 9/11 Commission wrote: "Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies ... It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination."



Only once we have done that will we be able to reconcile the critical with the chronic, operations with strategy, the present with the future. Only then will we end the time war.

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