

PRESIDENTS NEED FORESIGHT MORE THAN ONCE EVERY FOUR YEARS

PUBLISHED September 19, 2024

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Although the world is spinning with ever-increasing speed, the U.S. Government has not kept pace, instead making forward-thinking an afterthought. Hindered by self-imposed myopia, it stumbles like one of the giants in Gulliver's Travels from one strategic surprise to the next: Covid-19, the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas attack of October 7th, and on and on. Life on the Ship of State, never a pleasure cruise, looks more like "A Perfect Storm" with each passing day.

This is a good time to consider what is to be done. Presidential election years are a time of trepidation in the federal government and those who do business with it. Public and media attention to all three branches of is again climbing toward its peak, ratcheting up external scrutiny and the search for gotchas.

Internal pressures also rise as a wave of appointees heads for the exits and brings a cascade of data calls and writing assignments. The inherent uncertainty of the election results, the media fixation with polling and predictions and the possibility of wholesale policy and personnel changes only compounds that.

At least one group, however, not only embraces uncertainty, but eagerly anticipates election years. For the small community of strategic foresight practitioners and observers, the publication of the National Intelligence Council's latest Global Trends report is a kind of quadrennial Christmas morning, focusing attention on their field.



Quadrennial Foresight & Its Limits

Released between Election Day and Inauguration Day, the Global Trends reports have been prescient, open-source strategic intelligence products since 1997. They provide the President-elect (or the incumbent heading into a second term) with insights into the forces and uncertainties that will shape the context in which their administration will have to operate. Their defining method for accomplishing this, and the critical innovation of the foresight discipline, is the development of scenarios that paint alternate pictures of possible futures.

One testament to their prescience is the fact that every single one has highlighted the disruptions a global respiratory pandemic could cause. The failure of each federal department and agency to pull the threads on this foreseen threat and have contingency plans in place shows why a government-wide foresight capability is so critical.

The most recent edition, *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World*, offers five visions of the future: Renaissance of Democracies, A World Adrift, Competitive Coexistence, Separate Silos, and Tragedy and Mobilization. At first glance, some appear to be more likely than others, but all of them are plausible, and trying to calculate relative probabilities would miss the point. After all, as Cold War strategist Herman Kahn reportedly quipped, “the most likely future isn’t.”

Instead, the value of analyzing alternative futures is exploring what life could be like in these various scenarios and how we might have gotten there. Both commonalities and divergences offer clues to what leaders and policymakers should be doing in the near-term to give their organizations longer-term resilience in the face of the unpredictable. Scenario exercises, wargames, and the like are proven, powerful techniques for building understanding, and foresight is no different.

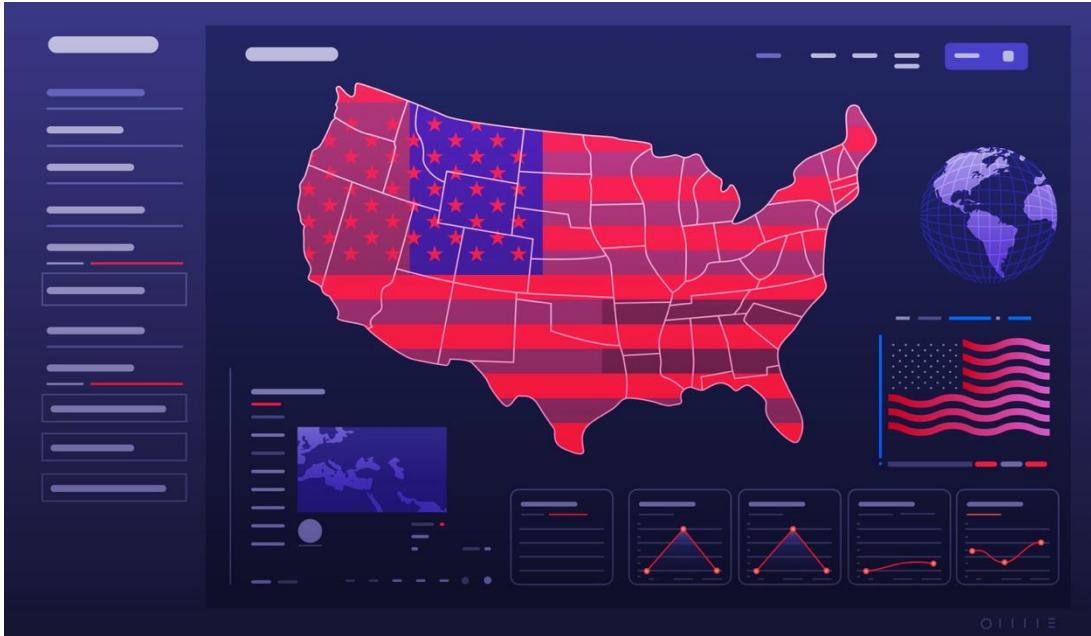
It might seem odd, then, that one has to wait four years for an updated analysis. The world today moves much faster than that, with new drivers of change emerging while others fade.

Both the president and the public have other federal foresight products at their disposal, such as the Coast Guard’s Evergreen series and the Air Force’s new Global Futures Report, which was released last March. Indeed, excellent futures analysis is ongoing today in many departments and agencies. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) encourages government-wide use through its Circular No. A-11. There is also a steady supply of talent to meet this demand, as both non-profit academic institutions and for-profit providers offer instruction.

However, much of this work is done in silos without any central clearinghouse or coordinating body. The timing and focus of each analysis are tied to the priorities and preferences of the agencies that commissioned them, or even to individual leaders and managers. As a result, the reach and impact of each product are often limited to the agencies’ existing audiences – and that’s just for the ones that are made public, to say nothing of the exercises that never leave federal servers.

This state of affairs creates a patchwork in which some key topics are assessed often and from many different angles, while others receive intermittent or no attention. This and many other gaps arise from the lack of a permanent entity championing foresight across the entirety of government, something that is fast becoming a standard feature in other countries.

Towards a Federal Foresight Function



Recognizing the inefficiency and lack of cohesion in this approach, a group of experienced futurists and strategy experts has stood up the Federal Foresight Advocacy Alliance (FFAA) to make the public case for a U.S. Office of Strategic Foresight. The FFAA has issued a concise and compelling argument detailing the myriad ways the U.S. national interest would be served by creating a White House-level center of excellence to conduct the futurist orchestra. The Alliance has considered what an effective organizational structure would look like, as well as accompanying steps the federal government could and should take to institutionalize foresight across all its domestic and international operations.

There is ample precedent. The Office of Science and Technology Policy has been advising presidents and spearheading interagency efforts since the Ford administration. Many other functional and topical offices already exist within the Executive Office of the President, including the Council of Economic Advisors, the National Space Council, and the Office of the National Cyber Director. They do not usurp the roles and responsibilities of Executive departments and agencies, but help make the whole of government greater than the sum of its parts.

Will having such an office, likely with its own flagship report(s), make the traditional Global Trends 'unboxing' less special? Maybe a little. But that's a trade that futurists, strategists, and even the National Intelligence Council itself would take without hesitation if it meant that our nation's ability to think systematically about the future matured from niche to national.

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