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CONFERENCE
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Shaping Tomorrow Today

Near-Term Steps Towards Long-Term Goals

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Summary

Today, in a time of rapid and profound change, our society faces many decisions with consequential implications for the United States' and humanity's long-term future. In many cases, society can best advance its long-term goals by focusing only on its near-term needs, because a progression of good short-term choices provides an adequate path to a desirable long-term future. But, in some instances, today's choices—often ones with relatively similar near-term implications—can lead to unavoidable and significantly different long-term paths. The ability to identify where a long-term view may prove most important as well as the ability to meaningfully incorporate such a view into today's decisions may prove critical in shaping our future prospects.

The common claim that policymakers think only in the short term is clearly untrue. Throughout history, leaders have made choices in an attempt to achieve long-term goals. Sometimes, they have chosen well, and sometimes poorly. On occasion, future generations can look back and say leaders acted effectively to achieve their long-term goals. Other times, the unintended consequences overwhelm the intended decision. And, frequently, short-term pressures dominate any long-term vision.

In March 2009, the RAND Frederick S. Pardee Center for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition hosted a workshop, "Shaping Tomorrow Today: Near-Term Steps Towards Long-Term Goals," to give policymakers and analysts an opportunity to explore tools to identify those cases in which a long-term view should have the most significant influence on near-term decisions and to suggest the long-term policy analyses that can most usefully inform these choices.

This document summarizes the proceedings of this Shaping Tomorrow Today workshop. The first chapter defines our concept of long-term decisions and summarizes each of the workshop sessions. Each of the next four chapters presents a white paper prepared for the event. The first of these, by Robert Lempert and Paul Light, describes the Pardee Center's innovative work in new methods for longer-term policy analysis—in particular robust decisionmaking (RDM)—that assess near-term policies' ability to achieve long-term goals over a wide range of future scenarios. The essay then describes how the U.S. government might use the concepts underlying these RDM methods to improve its ability to conduct effective long-term policy analysis (LTPA). The remaining three papers seek to identify long-term policy decisions in each of three different policy areas. Lant Pritchett examines long-term challenges in education in the developing world. Gregory Treverton examines priority long-term decisions facing U.S. foreign policy. Robert Lempert addresses how long-term thinking might affect the debate over near-term climate policy.

To better frame the challenge of identifying and evaluating the near-term steps most important to achieving long-term goals, the workshop participants adopted the view that a long-term decision occurs when the process of reflecting on potential events decades in the future causes policymakers to choose near-term actions different from those they would otherwise have pursued. Such an intent-focused definition is central to two main messages of the workshop. First, long-term thinking represents a practical and useful endeavor if it focuses on near-term actions. In brief, if it does not inform today's actions, long-term thinking provides only entertainment. Second, effective LTPA eschews the long-entrenched idea that long-term thinking should endeavor to predict the future. Rather than inquire, "What will the future bring?" policymakers should ask instead, "What steps can we take today to most assuredly shape the future to our liking?"

About 60 policymakers, policy analysts, and futurists attended the Shaping Tomorrow Today workshop at RAND's Santa Monica headquarters. The workshop's first day introduced participants to the philosophy and methods of RDM and helped them use this approach to identify important long-term decisions. The second day addressed how these ideas could be put into practice in real organizations.

The workshop opened with a backcasting exercise that proved to be one of the event's highlights. Traditional backcasting asks participants to envision a future goal and then work backward, describing near-term policies that would achieve these goals. The workshop's exercise added a twist in order to introduce the concepts of adaptive planning and robustness against surprise. Participants were divided into groups and asked to imagine a world in 2059 well on its way to solving its climate-change and energy challenges. Each group was then given 90 minutes to write a scenario describing a path to this happy outcome, focusing on the actions taken around 2010 and the events they set in motion. Before they started, participants were told that, just before they finished writing their scenarios, each group would receive an envelope describing two wild-card events occurring in the 2020s and 2030s that they would have to incorporate into their stories. Participants could not change the actions taken in the 2010s in response to these surprises; they could revise only their descriptions of how these actions played out over time. This unique backcasting exercise appeared very effective in encouraging participants to grapple with the concepts of robustness, adaptive policies, and surprise.

The participants then gathered in a plenary session to hear a series of talks on the Pardee Center's RDM methods that aim to provide a systematic foundation for the robust, adaptive thinking introduced by the backcasting. Participants next divided into three concurrent sessions to apply these long-term policy approaches in the broad policy areas of human development, international policy, and climate and energy. These sessions aimed to identify issues that would require long-term decisions in each of these three areas, characterize what makes that particular question one requiring the long-term approach, what would be required operationally to frame the issue appropriately, and what might be some immediate, short-term steps.

Dinner followed the afternoon breakout sessions and began the discussion of how governments and other organizations could implement these concepts. The keynote speaker, former California governor Gray Davis, addressed the question, "How can democracies make long-term decisions?" The governor described the many challenges, and some of the rare successes, elected officials face in attempting to implement long-term decisions.

The workshop's second day focused on the question of how governments could do a better job of long-range decisionmaking. The first session featured representatives from Canada, Norway, Israel, and the United Kingdom describing their governments' foresight activities;

the second featured representatives from U.S. governments at the federal and local levels. In both sessions, each speaker described his or her government's foresight activities and how they might be improved.

In addition to identifying specific issues for which long-term analysis might lead to better near-term decisions, the human-development breakout session suggested a list of general characteristics that would strongly suggest a situation in which long-term thinking might lead to better near-term choices. This was a welcome advance to the practice of LTPA.

The five factors tentatively suggested by this group include situations

- with substantial delays between actions and desired effects
- undergoing substantial transformations
- subject to significant surprises
- with institutional lock-in that yields a persistent gap between goals and performance
- where longer-term thinking can help solve short-term deadlocks.

The workshop concluded with a lively discussion of several key themes that participants clearly thought important to implementing long-term decisions in government. These themes included flexibility and precommitment as well as the importance of narratives in communicating with policymakers.

Some participants emphasized the importance of near-term actions that create options for future decisionmakers. As one example, the concept of navigating the future—*orienteering*—offers a key means to address long-term goals. Orienteering is the sport of racing across unfamiliar terrain using a map and a compass. In this case, the map should be thought of as rudimentary and involving long-term objectives; the compass should be thought of as the current direction that policy is taking. This view of adaptability may provide a much more useful framing for policymakers than the typical image of predicting what the future is going to be and navigating toward that future.

Much discussion emphasized the importance of narrative in enabling LTPA to inform effective long-term decisions. Understanding the policymaker's concerns and addressing those concerns in a straightforward, defensible narrative was a common characteristic of reported successes in long-term policymaking. Decisionmakers, from senior policymakers to the average voter, generally think in terms of stories. To reach them, analysts need to provide compelling narratives. Long-term plans often serve as communication devices for a broad constituency.

Participants identified several themes in effective narratives. Stories about success have proven to be effective, as have historical analogies. Some stories prove more difficult to tell. Policymakers often do not like to hear about uncertainty; they prefer a clear causal chain. It often proves difficult to describe the counterfactual or the trade-offs that decisionmakers face.