



# Anticipatory Governance: *Winning the Future*

By Leon S. Fuerth with Evan M. H. Faber

**The Project on Forward Engagement** offers a three-part strategy for enabling policy makers to cope with accelerating change and complex challenges. Rather than relying on crisis management, anticipatory governance creates a structure for information collection and analysis that is long-ranged, strategic, mission-focused, holistic, and connected to policy making that gets us ahead of events.

If the United States is to remain a well-functioning republic and a prosperous nation, the government cannot rely indefinitely on crisis management, no matter how adroit. We must get ahead of events or we risk being overtaken by them. In short, we must improve our management systems to meet today's accelerating and complex challenges.

The Project on Forward Engagement's work on anticipatory governance responds to this need by introducing three critical elements to existing executive-branch functions:

**1. Foresight-Policy Integration**—that is, foresight fused to policy analysis. Anticipatory governance offers a system for integrating fore-

sight into the way we create and execute national policies, including anticipation of upcoming challenges and opportunities as well as disciplined analysis of the long-range consequences of today's decisions.

**2. Networked Governance** for mission-based management and budgeting; a networked system for orchestrating whole-of-government management and budgeting to mission, including intensive coordination of our strategies and our assets applied over time.

**3. Feedback for Applied Learning.** Feedback enables us to monitor and adjust policy relative to initial expectations. Anticipatory governance creates a feedback system to constantly

measure consequence against expectations as a way to learn from experience and refresh policy.

This article describes suggested practical upgrades to executive branch systems. These upgrades are specifically designed to be light on resources, compatible with the existing structures and processes of government, and require no congressional action: They can be executed fully under customary presidential authorities. All proposals were vetted by volunteer panels of current and former senior officials.

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## The Problem: Foresight for Public Institutions

In a well-functioning republic, leaders need time for deliberation before making decisions. In the United States, the Constitution was designed to make sure that this time would be protected.

Today, the issues that decision makers deal with are increasingly fast-moving and complex. They involve concurrent interactions among events across multiple dimensions of governance. They cross jurisdictional and bureaucratic boundaries. They cannot be broken apart and solved piece by piece. And, rather than stabilizing into permanent solutions, they morph into new problems that have to be continually managed.

This pattern profoundly challenges the adaptive capacity of government systems that are essentially modeled on the early industrial period: vertical, hierarchical, segmented, mechanical, and sluggish.

A nineteenth-century government is simply not built to handle twenty-first-century challenges. This handicap contributes to a perception of America being in decline. Decline is not inevitable, but we have reached a moment of choice: Do we seize this moment to upgrade government for the challenges and opportunities of this century, or do we continue to operate with a system designed for an era gone by?

## The Proposal: Initiatives for Anticipatory Governance

The Project on Forward Engagement's report, *Anticipatory Governance: Practical Upgrades*, seeks to address this tension with upgrades to existing systems in the executive branch (i.e., the offices of the president and vice president, the Cabinet, and other federal agencies). It proposes three basic sets of changes: integrating foresight and policy, networking governance, and using feedback for applied learning. This study is about the operations of governance, not policies.

The recommendations made in *Anticipatory Governance* are practical and can be approached on a gradual, modular basis. They do not require

new "brick and mortar" institutions or large expenditure of resources; they intentionally leverage existing personnel and processes under new arrangements in order to strengthen the executive branch.

These upgrades are not a panacea, but they are short-cut approaches for beginning to adapt existing U.S. government systems and processes to be more anticipatory, adaptive, and resilient. The skills required to take these steps already exist in government, and regardless, *they can be taught*.

At stake is not only much-needed improvement in conducting the business of government, but also a tremendous potential for legacy: to improve the government's ability to think and act strategically in a vastly changed world.

Anticipatory governance would establish, in the White House, a capacity to mobilize and coordinate resources in a way that begins with a concept of *managing-to-mission* as the organizing principle for operations. It would also enable the White

House to keep track of the consequences of its own policies, so as to be more responsive to facts about what is happening, rather than projections of what was supposed to happen after decisions were made.

## Anticipatory Governance: An Overview of Implementing Foresight in Government

*Anticipatory governance* is a systems-based approach for enabling governance to cope with accelerating, complex forms of change. Anticipatory governance is a "systems of systems" comprising a disciplined foresight-policy linkage, networked management and budgeting to mission, and feedback systems to monitor and adjust.

Anticipatory governance would register and track events that are just barely visible at the event horizon; it would self-organize to deal with the unexpected and the discontinuous; and it would adjust rapidly to the interactions between our policies and our problems.

### Problem Types and Implications

"Acceleration" and "complexity" have become common catch phrases for describing today's challenges, but they are real phenomena that have profound meaning—and technical implications—for the way we understand issues and organize policy responses.

#### "COMPLICATED" PROBLEMS

- Originate from isolated causes that are clearly identifiable and fall within distinct bureaucratic categories.
- Can be dissected into isolated elements, addressed, and pieced back together.
- Consequences are generally proportionate to their causes (for every input, there is a proportionate output).
- Fixtures can be put in place for permanent solutions.

#### "COMPLEX" or "WICKED" PROBLEMS

- Result from concurrent interactions among multiple systems of events, and they erode the customary boundaries that differentiate bureaucratic concepts and missions.
- Cannot be broken apart and solved piece by piece. They must be understood and addressed as a system.
- Do not automatically stabilize, but intrinsically unravel into chaos if not systemically managed.
- Cannot be permanently solved. Instead, they morph into new problems as the result of interventions to deal with them.



In the Oval Office, FBI Director Robert Mueller (center right), Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano (far left) and other security advisors brief President Barack Obama (foreground, right) following the April 15, 2013, Boston Marathon explosions. A goal of anticipatory governance is to reduce susceptibility to future “black swans” such as these types of attacks.

### 1. Foresight and Policy Integration

Foresight should be a systematized and actionable component of the policy process. It is the disciplined analysis of alternative futures.

Foresight is not prediction. It is not vision, and it is not intelligence. It is a distinct process of monitoring prospective oncoming events, analyzing potential implications, simulating alternative courses of action, asking unasked questions, and issuing timely warnings to avert a risk or seize an opportunity.

As a disciplined process, organized foresight offers a means to simulate actions that would otherwise have to be tested against reality, where the consequences of error are irrevocable. A foresight-generating and horizon-scanning system can help governments detect trends and weak signals, visualize alternative futures, and foster better outcomes.

The United States lacks such a system at the national level. There are multiple concepts for organizing foresight into a specific stream of information available to policy makers but no mechanism exists for bringing foresight and policy making into an effective relationship. This problem is partly political, partly cul-

tural, and partly a matter of inadequate systems design. The political and cultural issues are very difficult to deal with, but mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that foresight and policy come together by design, rather than by chance.

These initiatives focus on ways to institutionalize an “interface” that can integrate foresight into the policy process.

#### • Organizing a Foresight System:

An organized, ongoing, and disciplined foresight process would provide a dedicated focus on the long term. It would bring into policy makers’ line of sight what is developing outside of their immediate vision, as well as the implications of current actions on future outcomes.

One option for organizing a foresight system is the creation of a foresight “fusion cell,” a sort of skunk-works operation with a small staff devoted to producing original foresight. Another option is a virtual organization comprising personnel operating in their existing government planning organizations. Other options include a Presidential Advisory Council for Foresight and periodic foresight retreats.

#### • Brokering between Foresight

**and Policy:** Foresight producers do not necessarily think like policy makers, and vice versa, so brokering between foresight and policy will require a dedicated staff to provide the critical link between these functions.

Assigning staff members to maintain a stream of foresight information as part of the data flow to officials is one approach to connecting foresight to policy. Similarly, ad hoc “translation teams” could improve communication between those who produce foresight information and those who consume it.

• **Incentivizing Foresight:** Foresight ultimately requires a demand signal. When the president and senior officials demand foresight, this creates an incentive within the bureaucracy to produce it and integrate it with current analysis.

Because foresight requires longer-range analysis, it tends to rely on assessment of hypotheticals. This kind of analysis is not regularly encouraged because it is speculative and may seem to have little bearing on immediate issues or decisions. But hypotheticals-based analysis should be mandated. Insights about the future should be tied to actions that can be taken to seize an opportunity



or avoid a threat, and foresight-based reporting should be tied to policy and to budget.

Incentivizing foresight might be done through awards for analysis that leads to opportunities being seized (or risks averted). Standards used in evaluating individuals for promotion might include their use of foresight and long-range considerations in their work. And those who offer long-range assessments that challenge current thinking should be protected.

- **Training Professionals for Foresight:** New leadership skills are required for twenty-first-century government professionals, and government especially needs leaders who are proficient in foresight. Civil servants, political appointees, and others need to be trained to think in a disciplined way about long-range issues and future contingencies.

Among the options for foresight training in government are crash courses for senior officials and appointees, adding foresight into the curricula at major government training institutions, including foresight proficiency and use of foresight methods in the promotion standards for civil servants, and exposing senior leadership to foresight through short workshops.

## 2. Networked Governance

Networked governance is needed to support whole-of-government planning and execution. Complex challenges require organizational innovation, and networks are the organizational response to complexity.

Government is now organized on the basis of “best practices” from the age of the vertically integrated American corporation. This system is ill-suited for the successful management of policies that address complex issues. Flattened, networked organizational structures can facilitate rapid flow of information and can thus serve as the basis for a smarter and more prescient bureaucracy.

Networks can help to engage the full resources of government in the form of adjustable groupings, and in arrangements that encourage a high degree of initiative, although responsive to overall strategic guidance from the president. Deep integration of the government would be a lengthy process requiring enabling legislation.

Agencies could plan and operate more strategically based on “management-to-mission” as the organizing principle of policy formation and execution. By “budgeting-to-

mission” rather than only by jurisdiction, they could bring resources to bear with greater precision.

Networked governance can also enable the president to acquire much greater situational awareness of the operations of government. These initiatives could be put into place rapidly by altering operations within the White House and the Cabinet.

- **Networking the Strategy/Policy Planning Offices:** Every Cabinet-level agency has a policy planning unit, but these offices have their own cultures and missions that are generally independent of one another. Strategies for networking these otherwise siloed activities, which would improve each department’s “whole picture” of major issues, include holding regular meetings of policy planning directors and creating ad-hoc mission-based teams of policy planners and of regional and functional bureaus. These teams would be useful for early spotting of events, and for discussion and review of possible responses.

- **Leveraging the Deputies’ Committee and Interagency Policy Committee Processes:** The Deputies’ Committee represents departmental viewpoints in dealing with national-level issues. The deputies could thus



OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

President Barack Obama (foreground, center) demonstrates a facility with networking by participating in a live Twitter question-and-answer session at the White House in December 2012. Part of improving government’s anticipatory capabilities will include enhancing all forms of networking between agencies and among staffers tasked with foresight and the policy advisors to whom they report.

## Forward Engagement and Anticipatory Governance

The term Forward Engagement® originally appeared as part of Vice President Al Gore's foreign-policy platform in 2000, and was used in two of the vice president's speeches: once at the United Nations Security Council in the course of its first session of the new millennium, and once six months later at a speech in Boston before an international conference of newspaper editors. It became the subject of the Project on Forward Engagement at George Washington University in 2001.

The term Anticipatory Governance was inspired by an e-mail message from former student and research assistant Neil Padukone in December 2008, writing about needed changes in the intelligence function in India following the deadly Mumbai attacks, and it also appears in various applications such as Clement Bezold's "Anticipatory Democracy," and in association with managing nanotechnology. It is used here as a descriptor for proposed modifications to systems in the executive branch of the government of the United States.

serve as a nucleus for mission-oriented, cross-disciplinary policy formulation. They could hold regularly scheduled foresight/mission meetings to focus on prioritized issues that require long-range thinking and proactive attention. Occasional retreats could allow for whole-of-government operation and long-range considerations.

The Interagency Policy Committee for strategy could serve as a "tiger team" to coordinate the broad scope of major interagency missions, priority balancing, and incorporation of long-range considerations.

• **Engaging the Cabinet Strategically:** The Cabinet can organize as

leadership teams to synchronize individual agencies on a mission-oriented basis. This would combine, at the top level, the ability to coordinate planning and execution. For this to happen, however, the president must lay out expectations for how secretaries should operate—articulate this change and enforce it.

Options for engaging the Cabinet include ad-hoc or formal interagency task forces and subgroups. A current example of this might be the Export Promotion Cabinet, which is a sub-cabinet group focused on trade policy. The secretaries could offer incentives for agencies to contribute to national-level missions in ways that

otherwise deviate from their standard routines. And Cabinet officials could participate in annual retreats that focus on assessing whole-of-government missions and exploring alternative futures.

• **Networking Integrators for Cross-Agency Missions:** Currently, about 35 officials distributed across the executive branch serve in positions known as "czars" responsible for coordinating complex national missions. Better terms for this role would be *integrators* or *coordinators*.

Collectively, these integrators have system-wide knowledge about where government is, where it is headed, and what can be done to convert the concept of whole-of-government into operational reality. Their collective knowledge can be tapped, which could be extremely important for helping the president achieve overall system coherence, but currently there is no system for doing so.

Options for networking these integrators include organizing them into strategic groupings that come together for systematic consultation and cross-fertilization of ongoing processes. Such networks would allow them to rapidly develop ways to work around impediments to coordinated action, both within their own organizations and among them.

• **Budgeting for Strategic Impact:**

*continued on page 48*



Working together: "Farm to Fly 2.0." A memorandum of understanding to develop biofuels for the aviation industry is signed by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack (left), and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, April 15, 2013. Breaking down departmental silos and connecting foresight to policy are goals of anticipatory governance.



## Anticipating Future Contingencies

**T**he goal of anticipatory governance—merging foresight with policy—is to reduce a people’s susceptibility to future contingencies (aka “wild cards” or “black swans”).

Other forms of major change come as the result of the accumulation of trends, which foresight should help to identify at the “horizon” line. Examples include:

- **Hurricane Katrina, 2005:** There was knowledge going back decades that the levee system protecting New Orleans was inadequate, and the efforts to get attention paid to it were ignored.

- **The Financial Crisis of 2008:** This crisis took decades to put it in place, and there were plenty of warning signs that went ignored.

- **BP Oil Well Failure, 2010:** Reports on the causes of the Deepwater Horizon spill indicate problems with safety and maintenance procedures involving BP and its subcontractors, which should have been picked up by government regulatory systems.

- **The Arab Spring, 2011:** We all knew about the youth bulge, unemployment rates, and rising commodity prices, but no mechanism exists to consider the convergence of such trends and to evaluate assumptions and alternative possibilities.

- **Fukushima, 2011:** No one can predict the particulars of a tsunami, but the safety systems in the reactors skimmed on backup and in effect had failure built into them under conditions more extreme than allowed for by the design.

Black swans on the horizon include:

- **Evolutionary secession produces unintended consequences.** Science and technology now permit us to dictate the evolution of our species and the planet. While regulatory regimes can respond to near-term risks, incremental advances are building in ways that pose medium- and long-range risks and opportunities for human destiny. Desired and undesired outcomes have direct relevance to immediate decisions in policy areas such as research and development, trade, regulation, and health care.

- **Environmental disruptions demand sudden adaptation.** Climate change poses a threat to the Earth’s ability to sustain human affairs as we have long practiced them. We may be either approaching

or have already passed an irreversible threshold; the window for preventative or adaptive action required across myriad aspects of governance is closing, while the debate continues regarding whether or not this even requires attention.

- **Labor force up-ended by “disruptive technologies.”** Watson, the *Jeopardy!* game show winner, changed the question from *if* to *when* automated machines will be able to replace “white collar” jobs previously only doable by humans. Meanwhile, additive (or “digital”) manufacturing promises cheap, durable, lightweight, custom-made products available instantly. We know from experience that automation can build (China) or disaggregate (U.S.) labor systems. How do the Watson and manufacturing revolutions impact U.S. strategy for the future of U.S. labor, commerce, and education?

- **Social media transform U.S. governance.** Online social networks have catapulted countries into revolution, and the clock may be ticking on their breakout impact on U.S. governance. Social media give voice to anyone, thereby posing meaningful challenges to a representative form of democracy not built for direct participation. U.S. policy on information transparency abroad will have implications for our own domestic politics. Will we shape or be shaped by this technology?

- **Demographic shifts present new market opportunities.** Population profiles across the globe are shifting dramatically toward both old age and urbanization. These trends are more or less locked-in: They will play themselves out over several decades, impacting the goods and services that these societies will require (and who will supply them), and therefore the economic strategies of nations. There will be changed mixes of domestically created products and of needs for imports, including imports based on a combination of increasing disposable income and more sophisticated tastes for everything from food to furniture to health care. How will these changes bear on our future market opportunities for goods and services and on the robustness of present trade arrangements in the future?

—Leon S. Fuerth, with Evan M. H. Faber

The disconnect between long-range strategy and the budget process inhibits government's ability to shape a budget that enhances strategic priorities. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) could be the gravitational field that aligns strategic planning with budget, and there is now currently an effort under way based at OMB to enhance agency and cross-agency priority setting as a function of budgeting and strategy. This process could be supplemented by creating a small strategy shop inside of OMB that would scan for signals of pending funding requests (such as in the case of a major event

nized by showing direct relevance to each other, with clear progression from broad strategy down to programmatic detail. Their due dates should be aligned to promote a strategic progression, and they should have parallel requirements for long-range analysis, linking national strategy with foresight.

And they should be "living documents"—by eliminating hard copies of the reports and posting them online, the strategy reports can be updated regularly and cross-referenced with hyperlinks to other documents.

- **Systematizing Strategic Priorities:** Government must set priorities in order to rationally allocate time and resources, but priority-setting

*"Alternative forms of dialogue are needed. Options include communicating at the strategic level; the resources needed for complex national priorities would be analyzed in terms of strategy and organized according to mission rather than jurisdiction."*



or development), triggering the process of studying how responses could be funded.

Also, because there are many possible futures, there should be alternative budgets—that is, alternative means for addressing a range of contingencies, including fiscal shocks. America's destiny is shaped by its budget, yet there is no mechanism for converting alternative visualizations of the American future and alternative constructs of the budget.

- **Synchronizing National Strategy:** Any strategy is a plan for imposing a predetermined outcome on a complex system. But complexity theory challenges this notion at a basic level: Any action designed to solve a problem in a complex system simply causes the problem to mutate. Grand strategies do not yield permanent stability. Nevertheless, it is possible to synchronize strategic behavior across the federal government.

Strategy reports could be synchro-

can produce an artificial hierarchy that flattens out real differences of relative importance. What is needed is parallel processing across government, synchronized around a common set of national priorities as articulated by presidential intent. There is no perfect balance, because resources are finite. Tradeoffs are inescapable.

Starting with presidential intent, systemizing strategic priorities means that objectives should be clearly articulated. The president should lay out major goals, assigning specific roles and management instructions, and present these at Cabinet-level meetings: "The top priorities are X, Y, Z."

To oversee these priorities and provide day-to-day guidance on synchronization, a Chief Management Officer for Priority Management could be named who has authority to interpret presidential intent.

- **Reformatting the Dialogue with Congress:** The current congressional committee system co-evolved with the legacy systems of governance in the executive branch. Organization tends to be based on turf rather than overall mission, and that tendency is amplified by partisanship. While the proposals for anticipatory governance outlined here could be implemented without congressional approval, such changes are likely to arouse suspicion within Congress over matters of jurisdiction and oversight.

Alternative forms of dialogue are needed. Options include communicating at the strategic level; the resources needed for complex national priorities would be analyzed in terms of strategy and organized according to mission rather than jurisdiction.

Another option is a *component-level implementation process*, or CLIP. Currently, long-term projects that are meant to shape the future and that cost billions of dollars may be canceled with nothing to show. A better approach (as suggested by students of the Forward Engagement course taught at George Washington University) is to break large projects down into manageable chunks that are independently valuable. CLIP is a way to analyze these chunks and their implications for meeting the long-term goals through short-term legislative steps. CLIP thus reduces political risks for introducing legislation for projects whose results may not be seen for decades.

These suggestions would supplement, not circumvent, the existing congressional oversight system.

### 3. Feedback for Applied Learning

The third requirement for anticipatory governance is feedback systems that monitor performance and speed up learning from results.

Every policy—no matter how impeccable or creative at the time of its creation—eventually deteriorates as circumstances change. At the national level, there is not a comprehensive system for monitoring the vitality or tracking the consequences of policies once they are in the process of execution, although there are



such efforts for some individual national priorities and programs.

Feedback systems can serve as a basis for ongoing evaluation, reassessment, and recalibration of policies in order to prevent breakdowns and system failures that routinely go undetected until it is too late. Applied to policy, feedback can measure results against estimates, sustain accountability and control in a networked system, and improve the conduct of ongoing policies. Injecting feedback into foresight mechanisms can help improve the design of policy in the future.

These initiatives focus on ways to institutionalize these kinds of feedback as a continuous process.

- **Identifying Explicit Feedback Precepts to Track Policy Execution:**

Every policy submitted for approval should include several precepts, including a statement of key assumptions, a definition of expectations, information streams to be monitored, performance indicators, the rate at which continuous monitoring will occur, points of responsibility and accountability, and a provisional date for diagnostic review of the policy. That date would be built into the White House calendar.

- **Establishing a Venue for Feedback:** A senior White House official, with light staff support, could be assigned to oversee the implementation of feedback processes for major policies. Unlike the chief of staff, whose attention is on policy, this individual would be the point person for management, maintaining awareness of the full scope of government operations and coordinating its assets and processes.

- **Continuously Routing Triggered Indicators:** Signs of policy deterioration or of circumstances arising to prevent a policy's execution would be monitored so that the coordinator in charge could provide early warning, routing it to the White House process manager or to the senior director.

- **Diagnostic Reviews of Consequences:** Finally, all major policies should undergo routine diagnostic review to check for signs of policy deterioration. Both internal and external auditing groups should conduct the reviews in parallel. Officials

in charge of implementation (such as White House senior directors) should maintain a scorecard for self-reporting. And a summary report should be conducted that details the evolution of the policy in response to feedback.

## Conclusion: Moving Forward with Anticipatory Governance

The obstacles to the government's ability to act are deeply rooted in its structures: the deliberately designed tension between the executive and legislative branches, the vertical and functional divisions of departments and agencies, and the extraordinarily cumbersome processes by which decisions such as budgeting are channeled.

The best chance is to make limited improvements in operations at the White House level, and to leverage these changes to improve the performance of government as a whole; this will open the door to broader transformation of government.

There are a number of efforts under way to implement changes such as those discussed in the report. Offices in the White House are working to unify strategy and policy planning across government, as well as to more closely tie strategy to budget. There are efforts in the U.S. intelligence community to take a more anticipatory approach. The current administration has made efforts to take a mission-focused approach to issues like trade promotion, and Cabinet officials as well as deputies are working in mission-focused teams and using feedback indicators to track outcomes of various national priorities. These efforts are a strong start, and they need to be strengthened and supported.

Policy makers take their cues from the president. If this is prioritized at the top, it will be taken seriously. Transition periods between administrations can be used to inaugurate systems changes. The time between elections should be used to think them through and to experiment with new ideas. At stake is not only much-needed improvement in conducting the business of government, but also a tremendous potential for legacy: to improve the government's

ability to think and act strategically in a vastly changed world.

The key is to think big, start small, fail cheap, and make adaptations along the way. □

### About the Authors



Leon S. Fuerth served the U.S. government for more than three decades, including 11 years as a Foreign Service Officer, 14 years on Capitol Hill, and eight years in the White House as the national security advisor to

Vice President Al Gore. He has served as a Distinguished Research Fellow at the National Defense University and is currently a research professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, where he directs the Project on Forward Engagement.



Evan M. H. Faber was the research assistant and executive associate with the Project on Forward Engagement, 2008-2013, and continues to focus on the nexus of foresight and governance. He has a BA in Philosophy

and an MA in International Science and Technology Policy.

This article draws from their report *Anticipatory Governance: Practical Upgrades*, which may be read or downloaded online from Forward Engagement, [http://forwardengagement.org/images/stories/anticipatory\\_governance\\_practical\\_upgrades.pdf](http://forwardengagement.org/images/stories/anticipatory_governance_practical_upgrades.pdf)

### About the Project on Forward Engagement®

The Project on Forward Engagement was established in 2001 by Leon Fuerth to explore methods for incorporating systematic foresight into the U.S. federal policy process, and for configuring government systems to deal with challenges that are "complex," rather than just "complicated."

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