

Time for a Reality Check



CLINTON J. ANDREWS

Debates on climate change, national security, social security, and resource policy are becoming unhinged from facts on the ground. It's time to tell your elected leaders that their theories about good public policy need testing to see whether they are valid and reliable.

The future has not yet happened, so public leaders are free to project onto it any image they want. By the time events catch up, they will probably be out of office. Of course, effective politicians anchor their future-spinning in current events. Thus the destruction of the Twin Towers has justified a view of the world as a hostile place where it is reasonable to conduct open-ended military actions, for example.

Outside the political arena, decisions about the future do not rely so much on imaginative rhetoric and the crafting of convenient coalitions. Instead, individuals daily choose for themselves whether to consume today or invest for tomorrow. Businesses regularly place independent bets today on what the marketplace will reward tomorrow.

Successful private decision makers quickly learn three things. First, a careful study of past events can tell them something about the future. Second, detailed forecasts are almost always wrong. Third, they'd better have a strategy for managing the associated risk.

Applying these principles to public decision-making might have value. Political decision makers often legislate without the benefit of knowing how well previous policies performed. As "the art of the possible," politics yields relativistic compromises among competing interests, not absolutely superior outcomes. Empirical knowledge becomes merely a strategic means to advance interests rather than an end in itself. I suggest that wider acceptance of the intrinsic value of good information is a necessary condition for clearer thinking about the future.

Any extrapolation of past trends must rely on a

mental model that is deterministic in some way. In the political world, views of the future are filtered through the mental models of different ideologies. Given the same information base, different political actors are very likely to arrive at different expectations for the future.

A democratic way to encourage convergence among competing mental models is to treat policies explicitly as experiments and then learn from their outcomes. Low-risk policy experiments are incremental rather than sweeping, and designed to make evaluation possible. Thus credible and frequent policy evaluation is a second necessary condition for clearer thinking about the future.

If the future is indeterminate, then politicians need to become good risk managers. They should support a diverse portfolio of policies, allowing that some will perform well and others will fail miserably. They should support some long-range activities and others that will help in the short run. They should balance the variety of objectives — economic, social, environmental, security-related — that contribute to the quality of life of those they govern. The third necessary condition is that politicians should resist imposing monolithic solutions.

Charles Lindblom had it partly right when he famously advocated for procedural rationality by means of disjointed incrementalism and mutual adjustment. But also needed is a dose of substantive rationality — empirical realism — that acknowledges the immense value of a few mutually agreed neutral facts.

An experimentalist's approach, based on better information, adaptive decision-making, and balance can help politicians make better decisions about the world's future. Yet many politicians resist treating policies as experiments, and they often fail to fund follow-up evaluations. It's almost as if they prefer not to learn what actually works. Such evidence might weaken sup-

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port for decisions driven by ideology, faith, or values.

Encourage your elected leaders to address big problems but to try new ideas at a safe scale, letting one innovative state or country serve as a policy experiment for the rest of us. Help them understand

how progress depends on making mistakes and then learning from them. Get them to test their views of the future against systematically collected evidence about the past. Bring verifiable reality back as a public value.

BOOK REVIEW

CHARLES THOMPSON

Technology and the Dream: Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941-1999

By Clarence G. Williams. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2001.

“Technology and the Dream” examines the educational processes and policies at M.I.T. and their effect on the African American students, faculty and the academic staff. The period from 1941 to 1999 is covered. However, the interval from 1974-1994 is given greater attention and is more thoroughly documented because it is during this period that the author, Clarence Williams, served as Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Minority Affairs at M.I.T.

The presentation makes use of lightly edited transcriptions of oral interviews of alumni, faculty, and staff. These interviews were conducted by Williams. The text of the book contains approximately seventy-five interviews. Another one hundred appear on a companion compact disk. Though most of the interviews are with alumni, I believe the reflections of administrators and staff are the most informative and give the book the proper grounding and historical perspective.

In reading this book I found myself often comparing the responses from alumni with those of the minority and majority staff and faculty. From the recollections of individuals that have cited common events, the reader is given the task of decoding and understanding those common threads that reliably define the educational process and its priorities. In doing so, one gets an outstanding view of the rationale behind, and the out-

comes of, affirmative action and diversity directed policies at M.I.T. The author, to his credit, does not try to rationalize the disparity between the recollections of minority and non-minority interviewees. This task is left to the reader.

The book affords the reader a glimpse of the academic and social life of African American students and the processes and attitudes that have been faced by and continue to face the faculty, as well as the successes and failures of administrators at M.I.T. involved in creating ways to address African American under-representation at the Institute. I found particularly interesting the attitudes that prevail about minority faculty at the school. The interview with Professor Wesley L. Harris, former Deputy Director of NASA, is an important one in this regard.

The book is not a veiled attempt at promoting the value of diversity nor does it claim that M.I.T. was successful in this regard. It simply presents facts as seen by those directly involved in the endeavor. Therefore, there is much for readers on both sides of the aisle to consider in this book. At 1000 pages, it is not easy reading but it is an important work for those engaged in the academic process. The book provides a much-needed touchstone for understanding the experiment and its outcome.

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