

Book Summary – The Age of the Unthinkable

Joshua Cooper Ramo's book, The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do about It is an interesting book that is worth a quick read. The book is written in much the same style of Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers, and garners much the same reaction: easy to read, interesting insights, and highly anecdotal.

Nonetheless, the anecdotes are worth pondering. Ramo sprinkles throughout his text interesting stories (à la Gladwell) that illustrate his key points, such as “We have military planning that stares instead of shifts. Little wonder it is often surprised (p. 163).” He points out throughout the book the tendency for Western militaries to focus on very specific objectives rather than taking a holistic, empathetic view of warfare, using the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad as an example.

His best (and most interesting) examples in the book are drawn from the lessons of the Israelis in dealing with Hizb'allah, which he describes as highly innovative by necessity and resilient to direct attacks.

Direct attacks on Hizb'allah made the militants more resilient, not less. Small perturbations in natural systems – and on the Hizb'allah time-table, most of Israel's actions were small perturbations – are usually the best way to build resilience.... Hizb'allah's greatest survival secret had nothing to do with cracking Israeli codes or smuggling missiles or building up a leadership hierarchy. It was in creating a system that allowed them to shift and learn and change – and that did all of those things even better when they were under attack.

Ramo discusses in detail the importance of the indirect approach, drawing on Sun Zi. Unfortunately, he uses the language of “effects-based operations” in his discussion of the indirect approach: “Effects-based operations have a completeness direct attacks never can, because they treat targets as systems and reach far deeper and wider for leverage and information (p. 209).” His discussion of addressing a system holistically, apart from the EBO language, is worth considering.

His bottom line is that we need to have a “deep-security view” where we look holistically instead of narrowly at the world; we should focus on our own resilience rather than “trying to attack everything that is scary,” and we should adopt an indirect approach that uses all of our resources on a wide front to achieve the effects of an indirect approach.

The book is full of ‘nuggets’ on his different topics, but short of real tangible recommendations of how to put all of this into action. It's worth a read, or what Stephen Loosley of The Australian called an “extensive glance.”

The book has received mixed reviews - some of the more prominent are excerpted below:

The New York Times book review by Michiko Kakutani entitled “The Era of Adapting Quickly” on April 27, 2009:

Though Mr. Ramo sounds annoyingly fuzzy and vaguely New Agey when he tries to outline tactics for dealing with “the age of the unthinkable,” he’s at least managed, in this stimulating volume, to make the reader seriously contemplate the alarming nature of a rapidly changing world — a world in which uncertainty and indeterminacy are givens, and avalanches, negative cascades and tectonic shifts are ever-present dangers.

The Christian Science Monitor book review by Josh Burek entitled “The Age of the Unthinkable” on May 6, 2009:

Ramo’s strength is his power of perception. Like Malcolm Gladwell – the author of “The Tipping Point,” “Blink,” and “Outliers” – Ramo amazes us as he effortlessly connects the insights of visionary figures as diverse as an Israeli intelligence chief and a venture-capital legend. But, unfortunately, also like Gladwell, Ramo doesn’t bring that perspicacity to his own thesis. What are its weaknesses? What’s the counterevidence? Wrapping his argument in a bow is pretty, but it doesn’t let readers examine the contents of the box. Despite these shortcomings, “The Age of the Unthinkable” is a fascinating study of the way the world really works. As a new generation of leaders maps out America’s course in the world, Ramo’s navigational skill will surely be in high demand.

The Australian, book review by Stephen Loosley entitled “Questions without adequate answers” on June 6, 2009:

This is worth an extensive glance, as Ramo writes in absorbing detail on subjects as intriguing as the resilience of Hezbollah and the original thinking of Aharon Farkash, a highly successful head of Israeli military intelligence. Farkash elevated Israel's defences against terrorist attacks by studying the reasons why some had failed. He looked for shifts in Arab political culture to read potential changes in the Middle East. This book contains other sections of real interest, from technological leaps in Silicon Valley to methods of teaching history. This is to the engagement of readers but ultimately Ramo does not blend his material into a related whole, which he urges everyone to do when approaching a problem. And his answers to the layered dimensions of global challenges -- a more resilient West with individuals being more involved and caring -- falls well short of the scale of the tasks confronting humanity.

Other Reviews:

Forbes: “Facing Down An Uncertain World” by Michael Maiello, March 31, 2009

The New Yorker: “Books Briefly Noted,” May 25, 2009

Dr. Jack Kem, CGSC

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