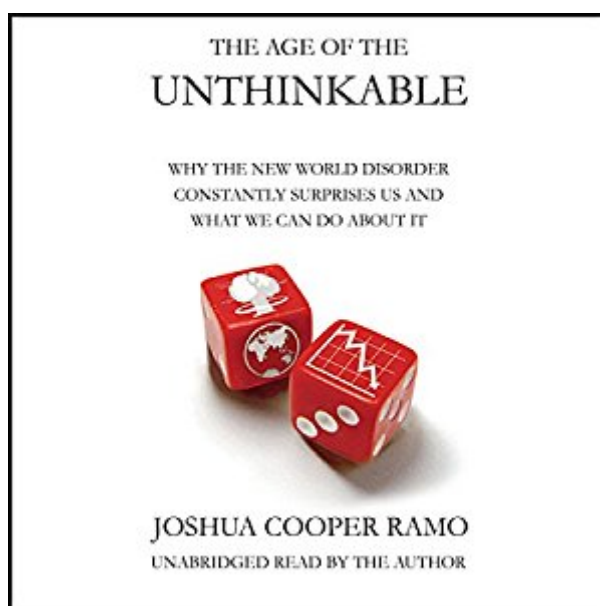


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The Age Of The Unthinkable: Why The New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us And What We Can Do About It



Synopsis

For decades, American foreign policy has been based on the seductive belief that there exists a logical relationship between power of states and the physics of change. And yet today policies designed to make us safer instead make the world more perilous. History's grandest war against terrorism creates more terrorists. Global capitalism, intended to boost the quality of life of people around the world, increases the gap between rich and poor. Decisions taken to stem a financial crisis guarantee its arrival. Environmental techniques engineered to protect species lead to their extinction. Middle East peace plans produce less peace. Our world is not becoming more stable or flatter or easier to comprehend. And what we face isn't one single shift, like the end of World War Two or the collapse of the Soviet Union, so much as a revolutionary avalanche of ceaseless change. Now, drawing upon history, economics, complexity theory, human immunology, psychology and his own extraordinary experiences, Joshua Ramo puts forth a radical new model for looking at the world, one that embraces its inherent unpredictability--and offers our best hope for dealing with problems and disasters as they emerge. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Resiliency. Maybe that was what was lacking. In the opening pages of *The Age of the Unthinkable* Joshua Cooper Ramo cites long-time Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's 2008

testimony to Congress on finding a "flaw" in his reasoning about how to manage the economy. In other words, Greenspan's questioner said, "you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right. It was not working?" Greenspan replied, "Absolutely. . . I was shocked. Because I have been going for forty years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working very well indeed. If Alan Greenspan were the only world leader who found himself at a loss to explain why his policies had gone awry, we wouldn't be facing so many crises simultaneously. But he is far from the only one. He's just the only one with high name recognition who has honestly and publicly admitted how baffled he is that, in effect, everything he knew was wrong. The sum of their misconceptions," Ramo writes, "has now produced a tragic paradox: policies designed to make us safer instead make the world more perilous. History's grandest war against terrorism, for instance, not only failed to eliminate terrorism, it creates more dangerous terrorists. Attempts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons instead encourage countries to accelerate their quest for an atom bomb. Global capitalism, intended to boost the quality of life of people around the world, claws the gap between rich and poor ever wider. And the litany goes on: financial regulation, environmental protections, Middle East peace initiatives — every major effort to confront a threat to human well-being seems to backfire with unintended consequences. In *The Age of the Unthinkable*, Ramo explains patiently and brilliantly that this is so because, at the most fundamental level, the architecture of civilization has become unimaginably complex. He turns to little-known cognitive scientists, terrorists, ecologists, military leaders, venture capitalists, and other insightful observers in their own fields to illuminate the larger challenge: that the way our brains work and the way we have been taught to think in the West equip us poorly to cope with the emergent properties that inevitably appear when complex systems are tweaked. The only way to survive over the long haul in such circumstances is always to view the Big Picture and to build resiliency into every system — military, financial, environmental, you-name-it. In one of the most revealing scenes in the book, Ramo refers to research conducted at the University of Michigan contrasting the ways American and Chinese students viewed a series of the same images. Each image depicted a large object in the foreground (a tiger, for example) with its environment shown in the background. The American students devoted an overwhelming proportion of their time to viewing the foreground objects and later proved largely incapable of describing the backgrounds against which they appeared. The Chinese students focused on the environment, viewing each picture holistically and spending only a limited amount of time on the objects in the foreground. Ramo points to this contrast (Greenspan's "flaw") as a signal of

what's wrong in the Western approach to problem-solving. Given any problem, we're schooled to attack it head-on, ignoring the context and often the possible repercussions of our actions. Instead, Ramo argues, we should take several steps backward, view every problem as the manifestation of numerous intersecting factors, and look for indirect ways to prod the system to make an end run around the problem. For instance, Ramo cites the work of General Aharon Farkash, Israel's most successful leader of military intelligence, who found that head-on attacks against insurgents invariably led to failure and that asking the usual questions would lead only to confusion. Rather than focus exclusively on the movement of arms through Iranian border crossings, for example, Farkash asked his agents to study the most popular show on Iranian TV to understand what was new in their adversaries' thinking. "Focus on things that move and change," Farkash insisted. Ramo sees that injunction as essential for a successful response to the challenges of the future. *The Age of the Unthinkable* is now on my short list of contemporary books that truly help explain how the world works today. It's one of the most thought-provoking works I've read in many years. According to Wikipedia, Joshua Cooper Ramo is a former senior editor and foreign editor of Time magazine and later Vice Chairman at Kissinger Associates, the consulting firm of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Joahua Ramo makes some interesting links in this book that use logic to project events of the natural world paralleling events in our social/technological world. He uses illustrations like "the sand pile" to promote the theory that large catastrophic events can be triggered by a small event and that there is a fundamental instability and unpredictability in the world of physics and in the natural world. The work was performed by a scientist named Bak, But Ramo uses it to formulate his vision of a chaotic world. The book is a collection of stories like the sand pile. Each of the stories is extremely interesting by themselves. The story of the ex Israeli intelligence chief Farkash and the reasons for his success when others failed was wonderful. The story of the investment banker Moritz and why he was a success was also interesting. The story of Hizb'allah and why they have been successful was equally interesting (did we ever learn anything in Vietnam about trying to apply absolute power and technology to suppress a people that were motivated and fighting for their homeland?). Where I think he falls a little short is tying all of the short stories together into a cohesive focused position that explains how to successfully deal with the complex planet conditions we face today. That said the book is absolutely a must read. Ramo's travels in some very interesting and select circles. The people he has access to, and the information they share with him is astonishing. His willingness to share that with us is a gift. I totally enjoyed this book, and read it in a day. So will you.

The author writes something toward the end which perhaps should more explicitly be written at the beginning, to grab the reader and frame the argument. "It means accepting - because this can never be proved in advance - that change will always produce more good than bad. This is the hope without which the great acts of self-sacrifice and imagination that we now require will be impossible." At times the references in the book can seem too pop-y or self-aggrandizing, but they're really not. They're just the ones necessary to get across a strong and difficult - for an American - concept. Overall, well-done and necessary for folks from all backgrounds to read about the future.

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