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Challenging the System: An Interview with John Rennie Short

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The Iraq debacle, the financial meltdown of 2007–2008, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and Hurricane Sandy in 2012—the United States has run into some very destructive scrapes over the last decade. In each, it suffered greatly not just from the events themselves but from system-wide failure to either plan properly for the event in advance or to make sense of the facts involved and respond accordingly once the trouble started.

Of course, the future is not likely to get easier for the United States or other countries. If anything, destructive events, both natural and human-made, may actually become more common and more destructive. Have U.S. officials learned much from the last decade? Are they better prepared for the ups and downs of the decades ahead?

Unfortunately, neither question gets a confident “yes” from John Rennie Short, professor of public policy at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County. In his new book, *Stress Testing the USA: Public Policy and Reaction to Disaster Events* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), he assesses persisting structural weaknesses in U.S. public-sector and private-sector crisis preparation as they have manifested themselves over the preceding ten years. Then he looks ahead and presents a troubling conclusion: these structural weaknesses continue to exist, and unless they are fixed, they will compromise the United States’s capability to survive future crises.

Short is uncertain how dedicated the present crop of U.S. lawmakers may be to changing politics as usual. But today’s young people might well be the ones to bring about needed change. Today’s Millennials are much more practical and less ideological than their elders, Short says. And they might have what it takes to solve the problems that their elders could not.

Short recently shared his observations and hopes for the future in this interview with

World Future Review’s (WFR) associate editor, Rick Docksai.

WFR: The United States has seen its share of crises over the last few years, and the question that many futurists would probably ask is “How much better prepared is this country for the next crisis?” It sounds like you have some doubts about U.S. crisis preparedness as it now stands. And you express those doubts in your book.

John Rennie Short: What I did in the book was to look at the whole range of events—four in particular, namely, the Iraq war, Hurricane Katrina, the financial crisis, and Hurricane Sandy. In a sense, I wanted to shift the debate toward looking at systemic failures and away from blaming any one particular individual or group. Often we’ll look for one person to blame—“the botched Hurricane Katrina response was Michael Brown’s fault,” for example, or “the Wall Street meltdown happened because of greedy bankers.”

I tried to show that there were structural issues at work. If we say it was just greedy bankers, well, there are *always* greedy bankers. What changes can we make to the larger system?

We should be more open to dissident voices—such as the voices that were warning us about the housing bubble, or the voices warning us against invading Iraq. Also, we tend to look at the future as simply an unfolding of the past. At this moment, however, that is actually a particularly dangerous notion to hold.

Take the notion of climate change as an example: all of our thinking and all of our infrastructure is based on the weather patterns that we have known for the last few hundred years. Those were patterns in which we could expect a once-every-five-hundred-years “super storm,” or maybe a one-in-a-hundred-years

super storm. But under climate change conditions, the probabilities of a super storm vastly increase. So that one-in-a-hundred-years super storm becomes a *one-every-ten-years super storm!* The reality is changing, but our infrastructures and thinking stay woefully behind.

WFR: Those “super storms” are one of the near-future threats that you warn readers about in your book. What would such a storm entail? Certainly Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy seemed pretty “super” in themselves.

Short: We have a scale of hurricanes, something like 1 to 5, and 5 is very, very high. And we tend to get very few of those, maybe one in a hundred years. And climate scientists are saying there are just more and more of these storms that are reaching that scale of intensity. The storm that would have hit us once in a hundred years is now more likely to hit us once every ten years.

And so the probabilities are changing very, very quickly. And we should always be wary when trying to predict these things. I think climate and weather are very unpredictable. That’s why I’ll tend to speak in probabilities. We had Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and it wasn’t followed by other major storms. The years that immediately followed weren’t really active years. But then just last year (2012), we had Hurricane Sandy. It doesn’t follow a straight line. There isn’t a set pattern. But the risk is real nevertheless. And what it demonstrates is that you need to change the metric of risk.

The same applies with fiscal risk. Clearly, there is growing systematic risk in the financial system. And at the same time that we have all of this increasing risk, we also have these sets of beliefs against regulating the market. We’re still implementing the ideology of deregulation, and we’re doing so at the very time when all of these risks are going up.

Just as the world is becoming more uncertain, people more than ever want the warmth of certainty. “Deregulation, that’s good”; “build up the military, that’s good.” They hold onto these simplistic notions from the past and apply them to the future, just as the future is becoming more unpredictable.

WFR: Do you think perhaps it’s a case of willful ignorance?

Short: It’s almost a sort of fear. Just look again at climate change. There’s almost a general agreement around the world that climate change is occurring, but here in the United States, politicians just want to deny it. They don’t want to accept the notion of very rapid change.

When you’re facing an uncertain future, a very common and very strong response is to cling onto what you already know. “I believe in the Ten Commandments,” a sort of religious fundamentalism, it’s a clinging to the comfort of the past just as the present is becoming more uncertain and the future is becoming more unknowable. And then it becomes more of a cultural war, as to whether climate change is occurring. Or if you criticize the military—do we really need to spend more on the military, when we already spend so many times what China, Russia, and any other country spends on theirs?

WFR: It’s apt that you bring up the military. U.S. officials do invest massive amounts of time and money to avert certain possible military threats, such as Iran building nuclear weapons and handing them to terrorists. But they do comparably little to prepare for many non-military threats, such as climate change. It’s ironic, too, given that the possibility of harm arising from global warming is arguably greater than the possibility of an Iran-built nuke striking the United States or one of its allies.

Short: One of the issues that I think politicians are aware of is the notion of blame and responsibility. If you face a military attack or terrorist attack, someone was responsible for this being allowed to happen. If a committee after Hurricane Sandy investigates, there just isn’t the same wave of blame going on. It’s easier to just treat it as a natural disaster. The climate change debates are framed often as that it’s “natural.” *It’s a tsunami; there’s nothing we can do about that.* But you can never do that with a military thing. You can never say it’s natural.

And I think the other thing is that it was a Republican president (Dwight D. Eisenhower) who spoke about the military industrial complex. He was a military man himself, and he was very worried about it. And that was when the military was much less powerful than it is now.

In terms of military strategy, we built up for years against the Soviet Union. And now we're facing a growing array of completely different asymmetrical threats. In terms of responding to the real threats that we face, I think of all them, the most formidable is climate change. That, we're facing all up and down the east coast of the United States. But instead we're still focusing on threats of the past and not looking at very pressing issues.

I'm kind of optimistic, though, because one of the things that is happening is that, with the Internet and social communications, you can question the assumptions that some of us take for granted. There is more information available on my computer and on anyone's computer to offer a sort of alternative discourse.

WFR: There is much misinformation and selective misuse of information on the Internet, too, however.

Short: Well sure, it's a mixed bag. But I think that overall, the notion of having communities of people networking and sharing information makes the public discussion more open and gives all of us a variety of opportunities for triangulating our beliefs. That's my hope, that the Internet can give us more of an alternative view from that of the Pentagon or Wall Street or BP.

Because I think that there traditionally hasn't been an alternative in these big discussions. When public agencies are supposed to look after various activities, they often become captured by them. Like Wall Street captured the SEC—the SEC was supposed to regulate them and it became captured by them.

Or it's not a literal capture but a cognitive capture, where they capture the whole debate. Take the shift toward deregulation, that was bipartisan. It began with Reagan and it went through Bush and Clinton and Bush again and Obama. Everyone thought it was a good thing.

WFR: The dysfunctional polarization of Congress and the Obama administration surely isn't very amenable to crisis preparations of any kind. How feasible is it to enact the changes that you call for in this current political climate? And how might that political climate itself change (or not change) in years to come?

Short: We are in a particular period, one that comes along every generation or so, when there's a major time of change and the policies of the past just don't work. Another example would be Roosevelt's New Deal. There was a sense, when Roosevelt came in, of *we just have to try stuff*. Just relying on the market wasn't going to work. The New Deal was less about ideology; it was more about *let's see what works*.

We're in another one of these periods. We have a storm of oncoming changes, from climate change to fiscal meltdown. And we're in this policy vacuum. The policies of the past just haven't worked. We need a time of fresh thinking and openness to new ideas. But I kind of worry about the notion of a "blueprint." We're in a period of such rapid and large-scale change that we need to be flexible.

It's sort of generational. I think maybe we need a new generation to take over. All the polls and evidence tell us that the new generations are much less ideological, much more pragmatic, much more tech savvy. One example would be attitudes toward gays. In the 1990s, Clinton was "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and that was seen as a major step forward. And nowadays, you do polls, and young people just don't get what the older generation was so hung up about.

I think we could very well be in that generational switch. Some of those old debates are no longer debates, because there's a new generation.

WFR: Essentially, the younger generations might have what it takes to fix many of the problems that their elders couldn't.

Short: They have more open minds. I see it in my own students. They just don't get the Sturm und Drang of some of these old debates. Getting back to Don't Ask, Don't Tell—the

law's repeal really highlighted this generational shift. When the debates were going on, Senator McCain said "ask the military." So they did. And it turned out the military was overwhelmingly *for* repeal. And this was in part because the military was overwhelmingly staffed by the younger generation. So that's one of the good takeaways that I have.

WFR: What role would social activism play in bringing about this societal change that you describe?

Short: I think social activism is a powerful generator, but unless you channel it, it can just sort of dissipate. Sort of like Occupy Wall Street. That was just such a wasted opportunity. You could have channeled it into raising the minimum wage or pressing for more regulation. Instead it was more of a self-indulgence.

I think one of the ways to bring about real lasting change is to have a sense of the passion of activism but also for the boring everyday realm of politics, of committee meetings, and getting regulation changed. Just protesting has some impact, but you have to leverage it into something, as opposed to simply say *I'm going to stay in a tent for a few months*.

We have a change in consciousness under way about being green: green buildings, green energy, and so on. And that was a combination of efforts, reformers, researchers, and activists like Rachel Carson. Who would have thought that forty years after *Silent Spring*, you'd have an EPA, and a business climate where not being green is a way to lose customers? It's about shifting the debate and shifting the narrative. I think it starts with books, articles, and media, until it becomes part of the general narrative.