[HARDCOVER: US]

There goes the neighborhood

Joshua Cooper Ramo does a nimble job of showing how ideas such as chaos science and complexity theory shed light on the world's current political and economic climate

BY **MICHIKO KAKUTANI**
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin famously divided thinkers into two categories: hedgehogs (like Plato, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen and Proust), who know one big thing and tend to view the world through the lens of a single organizing principle, and foxes (like Herodotus, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, Balzac and Joyce), who know many things and who pursue various unrelated, even contradictory ends.

According to Joshua Cooper Ramo's provocative new book, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, one study — in which hundreds of experts in subjects like economics, foreign policy and politics were asked to make predictions about the short-term future and whose predictions were evaluated five years later — showed that foxes, with their wide-ranging curiosity and willingness to embrace change, tended to be far more accurate in their forecasts than hedgehogs, eager for closure and keen on applying a few big ideas to an array of situations.

It's a finding enthusiastically embraced by Ramo, who argues in these pages that today's complex, interconnected, globalized world requires policymakers willing to toss out old assumptions (about cause and effect, deterrence and defense, nation states and balances of power) and embrace creative new approaches. Today's world, he suggests, requires resilient pragmatists who, like the most talented Silicon Valley venture capitalists on the one hand or the survival-minded leadership of Hezbollah on the other, possess both an intuitive ability to see problems in a larger context and a willingness to rejigger their organizations continually to grapple with ever-shifting challenges and circumstances.

With this volume, Ramo, managing director at the geostrategic advisory firm Kissinger Associates and a former editor at *Time* magazine, seems to have set out to write a Malcolm Gladwellesque book: a book that popularizes complicated scientific theories while illustrating its arguments with colorful case studies and friendly how-to exhortations.

In drawing upon chaos science (explored in detail in James Gleick's 1987 book, *Chaos*), complexity theory and the theory of disruptive innovation (pioneered by the Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen), Ramo does a nimble job of showing how such theories shed light on the current political and economic climate while avoiding the worst pitfalls (like an overreliance on suggestion and innuendo and the use of unrepresentative examples) of Gladwell's clumsy last book, *Outliers*.

But if Ramo is adept at assessing the precarious state of today's post-Cold War world — in which nation states face asymmetric threats from the likes of terrorists, drug cartels and computer hackers — he proves much less convincing in articulating practical means of grappling with such daunting problems.

The central image that Ramo uses to evoke what he calls this "age of surprise" is Per Bak's sand pile — that is, a sand pile described some two decades ago by the Danish-American physicist Per Bak, who argued that if grains of sand were dropped on a pile one at a time, the pile, at some point, would enter a critical state in which another grain of sand could cause a large avalanche — or nothing at all. It's a hypothesis that shows that a small event can have momentous consequences and that seemingly stable systems can behave in highly unpredictable ways.

It's also a hypothesis that Ramo employs in this book as a metaphor for a complex world in which changes — in politics, ecosystems or financial markets — take place not in smooth, linear progressions but as sequences of fast, sometimes catastrophic events.

Real-life sand-pile avalanches, like the collapse of the Soviet Union or the 1929 crash of the stock market, Ramo declares, demand "a complete remapping of the world": policymakers must junk a lot of their old thinking to cope with this unpredictable new order.

For instance, many of the assumptions of the realist school of foreign-policy making — which focused on nation states, "assumed countries were rational, and made the bet that pure power was the solution to any problem" — have been undercut by the irrationalities and contingencies that have recently multiplied on the world stage.

As Ramo observes, "Theories that involve only armies and diplomats don't have much use" when "confronted with the peculiar nature of a financially interconnected world, where danger, risk and profit are linked in ways that can be impossible to spot and manage."

To make matters even more complicated, Ramo continues, complex systems "tend to become more complex as time goes on."

"The systems never get simpler. There was no moment at which they would evaporate or condense into a single, easy-to-spot target such as the USSR. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, for example, was a single very knotty event that, in turn, gave birth to hundreds of jihadist groups, each of which developed different methods of terror, particular techniques of attack and destruction, which themselves were always changing and evolving."

In this sand-pile world, a small group of terrorists armed with box cutters can inflict a terrible blow on a superpower — as al-Qaida did on 9/11, just as bands of insurgents in Iraq managed to keep the mighty US military at bay for three long years.

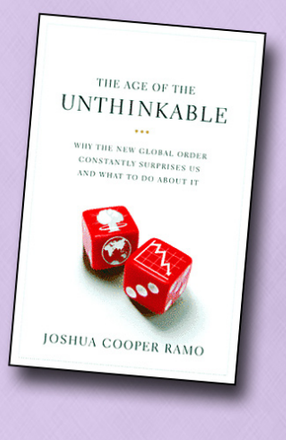
Iraq, Ramo astutely notes, is a war that showcased all of America's most "maladaptive" tendencies. It was inaugurated on the premise of flawed idees fixes: that it would have "a clean, fast end" and would lead to a democratic regime that would transform the Middle East in a positive fashion. And the certainty of Bush administration officials not only led to incorrect assumptions (like the bet that "the ecosystem of Iraq would settle into something stable that could be left to run itself") but also resulted in an ill-planned and rigid occupation that was "incapable of the speedy refiguring that life in a war zone" inevitably requires.

So how should leaders cope with the sand-pile world? How can they learn to "ride the earthquake" and protect their countries from the worst fallout of such tremors? Ramo suggests that they must learn to build resilient societies with strong immune systems: instead of undertaking the impossible task of trying to prepare for every possible contingency, they ought to focus on things like "national health care, construction of a better transport infrastructure and investment in education."

He suggests that leaders should develop ways of looking at problems that focus more on context than on reductive answers. And he talks about people learning to become gardeners instead of architects, of embracing Eastern ideas of indirection instead of Western patterns of confrontation, of seeing "threats as systems, not objects."

Though 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.

Publication Notes



THE AGE OF THE UNTHINKABLE: WHY THE NEW WORLD DISORDER CONSTANTLY SURPRISES US AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

BY JOSHUA COOPER RAMO
280 PAGES
LITTLE, BROWN & CO

SUNDAY PROFILE

Centers for Disease Control Acting Director Richard Besser fields questions posed by the press about swine flu. PHOTO: REUTERS

Doctor cool

Richard Besser has won media plaudits for his clear, no-nonsense approach to the swine flu outbreak

BY **JITENDRA JOSHI**
AFP, WASHINGTON

His language clear and his style unflappable, Richard Besser has the ideal bedside manner for a US citizenry nervous about a full-fledged pandemic of the deadly swine flu virus.

The acting director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has emerged as the no-nonsense yet soothing public face of the US administration's response to the outbreak of H1N1 influenza.

US President Barack Obama lacked a health secretary until late Tuesday when Kathleen Sebelius finally won Senate confirmation. Besser has filled the void with aplomb.

"Unfortunately I would anticipate that we will see additional deaths," the 49-year-old physician said Wednesday after the CDC confirmed a Mexican toddler who died in Texas had become the first person killed by swine flu on US soil.

Coming from some public officials, such dire warnings might be expected to sow fear and alarm. But Besser has won media plaudits for giving a clear enunciation of the facts in layman's talk.

"It's a serious outbreak we're dealing with," he said, spelling out an "aggressive" response by health authorities.

"With a new infectious agent, you don't sit back and wait and hope for the best," he added, while urging the public not to lose sight of the fact that common-or-garden flu remains a deadly threat every year.

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

After the previous administration of former US president George W. Bush was accused of preferring political loyalty to expertise, the prominence of scientific specialists in the Obama government has been a relief to some.

Jeff Levi, executive director of Trust For America's Health, said Besser and his colleagues were providing "clear and strong" leadership at a fraught time.

With his well-received handling of the swine flu crisis, the good doctor has done his career prospects no harm. Sebelius might name him as permanent CDC chief. Obama meanwhile is still looking for a surgeon-general.

Besser is a pediatrics specialist who received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1986 before completing his post-graduate residency at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland.

The *Washington Post* said he then worked in Bangladesh for a year researching the spread of disease — an early interest that is now bearing fruit in the swine flu outbreak.

Imposing at 2m, his ease in front of the cameras was helped by a 1990s stint as a TV health reporter in San Diego, California, according to the *New York Times*.

Besser's father and brother are both doctors, although another brother works as a medical malpractice lawyer — a profession that is generally loathed by the community of US physicians.

He had been at the CDC in Atlanta, Georgia for 13 years before his elevation in January to acting director, starting as a researcher into the epidemiology of food-borne diseases.

That job sent Besser to Boston where, according to the *Times*, he painstakingly analyzed deer droppings in apple orchards to pinpoint cider as the cause of an Escherichia coli bacteria (E. coli) outbreak that had caused serious illness in the city.

NO STRANGER TO CRISIS

Besser received vital grounding for his current high profile by taking over as the CDC's head of emergency response in August 2005 — just as Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans.

On his blog, security specialist Rich Cooper described meeting Besser in 2006 at a Harvard University-sponsored forum on preparing leaders to deal with national crises.

Cooper wrote: "In spending time with him in that program, you got the feeling that if we ever had a really bad day in this country, he was a guy you wanted to have around."

[SOFTCOVER: UK]

The book that inspired 'The Wire'

'The Corner' gives a chilling picture of the drug trade and its child victims in 1990s Baltimore

BY **SEAN O'HAGAN**
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

The corner in question is where West Fayette meets Monroe Street in West Baltimore, the site of one of an estimated 100 open-air drug markets in that beleaguered US city. The year is 1993, a pivotal one in the escalation of Baltimore's illegal round the clock drug trade.

"On every corner, street dealers began using minors, first as runners and look-outs, then as street-level slingers," elaborate David Simon and Ed Burns. "When children became the labor force, the work itself became childlike, and the organizational structure that came with heroin's first wave was a historical footnote."

Anyone who has seen *The Wire*, Simon and Burns's equally epic and labyrinthine police drama, will be familiar with the crucial role played by children — not just teenagers, but their even younger siblings — in the distribution of heroin and crack cocaine on Baltimore's most notorious corners. Here, those children are made real. Likewise, the dealers, the cops, the hustlers and the politicians: all the venal, murderous, muddle-headed and heroic individuals whose fictionalized alter-egos have so mesmerized viewers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Corner, which was originally published in the US in 1997, is the book that spawned *The Wire*. It tracks the lives of several players in Baltimore's drug demi-monde and of some of the hard-working, hard-bitten cops who try in vain to police the corners. It reserves its not inconsiderable anger and scorn for the politicians who, in *Wire* parlance, "juke the stats" — manipulate the crime figures for personal gain.

Famously, the Democratic candidate for mayor of Baltimore, Martin O'Malley, campaigning on an anti-drug ticket, brandished a copy of the book while making a speech on the corner of the title in 1999. Paradoxically, given that the book is, among other things, a fierce polemic against drug prohibition, he won.

Reading *The Corner*, having watched all five series of *The Wire*, is an unnerving experience. For once, the drama does not exaggerate the reality. One could say, at the risk of antagonizing the show's fanatical fans, that it tends slightly to romanticize it. Look, for instance, at Omar, the cold-hearted but effortlessly cool stick-up artist in *The Wire* who makes a living by identifying, then robbing at gunpoint, the stash houses of the neighborhood drug gangs. On-screen, he is a Hollywood archetype: the cold-blooded outlaw, the loner, the man in black. In real life, as the authors point out, the Omars of Baltimore are living, even by the standards of the gangster "game," on borrowed time, their job "little better than a death wish."

The street lives depicted in *The Corner* are tougher, sadder and more desperate than those dramatized in *The Wire*. The first person you meet in the book is Fat Curt, a veteran of the corner, with "needle-scarred hands," arms like "swollen leather" and "bloated legs" who is "bent to this ancient business of survival." He is now caught up in another daily grind, trying to hustle welfare aid for the drug-related lymphoedema that ravages his scarred body. Elsewhere, the young DeAndre is engaged in the struggle to stay straight, often working for a fraction of what he would earn on the corner, while his mother shoplifts to maintain her habit. Then there's Tyreeka, pregnant at 13, feisty and almost proud. What *The Corner* shows us, often in the graphic detail of hardcore drug use, is that generations have fallen to America's drug trade.

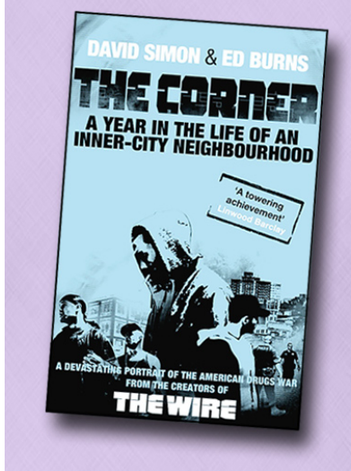
It is the children, though, who make this such a powerful work. In one of many illuminating passages where first-hand reportage gives way to concise contextualizing, Simon and Burns write: "In the 1990s, the drug corner is modeled on nothing more complicated than a fast-food emporium, an environment in which dealing drugs requires about as much talent and finesse as serving burgers … the modern corner has no need for the applied knowledge of previous generations."

The children, more than anyone, know this. They surrender one kind of education for another, the school for the street, the classroom for the corner. They know where their lives are going and what it takes to survive. They see the cost of not surviving all around them. They also, more chillingly, seem drawn to "the game," to its deadly romance and the sense of entitlement, however brief or insecure that may be.

The Corner took more than a year of on-the-street research — what David Simon, who cut his journalistic teeth as a crime reporter on the *Baltimore Sun*, self-deprecatingly calls "stand-around-and-watch journalism." It is beautifully written, by turns evocative and simmeringly angry. On one level, too, the book is an indictment of contemporary newspaper journalism, where this kind of sustained — and expensive — reportage has been replaced by desk work. In America, it seems, the system has failed several generations of inner-city families and the media have, to a great degree, let the government and the city legislators off the hook.

Early on in *The Corner*, Simon and Burns point out: "All across the inner city — from Lafayette Courts to Sandown to Cherry Hill — slinging drugs is the rite of passage." In other words, neighborhoods once considered safe and middle class now have their very own corners. That, perhaps, is the real message of a book that, in the main, avoids messages, that does not preach or proselytize, but simmers with frustration and anger at the great farce that is America's so-called war on crime.

Publication Notes



THE CORNER: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF AN INNER-CITY NEIGHBORHOOD

BY DAVID SIMON AND ED BURNS
628 PAGES
CANONGATE