

# warren bennis on . . .



## A Bright Future for Complexity

**A**lfred North Whitehead cautioned us wisely: "Seek simplicity and then distrust it." Trouble is that too many—especially those responsible for solving our social problems who come up with non-solutions—seek simplicity and then forget to distrust it. Like one of the more popular "solutions": the best way to solve a problem is to just throw more money at it.

It's a familiar story. We all know people who try to "do good," but somehow, unexpectedly, things turn out worse than before. Some illustrations: the latest miracle drug has unexpected side effects; lawmakers enact bills and then discover consequences never anticipated and which undermine their original purposes; and sunshine laws pro-

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**Predicaments represent one of the most basic characteristics of all successful modern societies. . . They keep alive alternatives.**

hibiting closed meetings lead more and more to cliques meeting privately to agree on actions subsequently revealed at the "public meeting."

The problems of our world are too complex for any one person, organization or institution to absorb, let alone deal with. There are too many predicaments, too many grievances and too many institutions under attack. Too few institutions try to understand them! There are too many ironies, polarities, dichotomies, dualities, ambivalences, paradoxes, contradictions, confusions and complexities.

### **Vanquishing the villain**

"It's the mess in which we live," said Henry Ford in a recent issue of *Fortune*, referring specifically to the regulatory profusion hampering the automotive industry: the Clean Air Act, the Energy Conservation Act, the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act.

As my "mess list" shows (see box), most everyone seems to be involved in a different and "favored" mess. For the automotive industry, compliance to federal regulations is seen as a "punitive speed-up," and the major villains are a wayward Congress, a neglectful White House and overzealous regulators. The solution seems simple: deregulation, fire the regulators or both.

For the incongruous duo of Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's* and Billy Martin, the ex-manager of the New York Yankees, the *media* are the villains. Lapham, writing in *Harper's*, February 1978, says: "It is the ubiquitousness and thus the apparent omniscience of the media that sustains the general impression of impotence." Martin, when asked to account for the Yankees' winning streak of 18 out of 20 games after his departure, quickly replied: "The newspaper strike has made the difference. There aren't any reporters about stirring up garbage and writing what one player says of another." The simple solutions here range from censorship to more subtle forms of restrictions on a free press.

A fine example of "simplicity without distrust" comes from the mounting current of opinion that such individuals who bring illness on themselves—e.g., lung cancer, cirrhosis of the liver—should be ineligible for health benefits or should pay a much higher premium, since they seem to raise everyone else's premiums and tax bills. It seems an understandable conclusion; it is hard to conceive of a more apt expression of our fundamental belief in individual responsibility. Of course, the solution would entail a new bureaucracy composed of a battalion of newly appointed "health judges" assigned to

## Forty-Five Messes: A Chain Letter

Check your favorite mess, add two more to the top of the list, and send to your five worst enemies. This will assure the proliferation of predicaments and

guarantee a bright future for complexity. It will also get this off your desk and on to somebody else's (messes listed in alphabetical order).

Accelerating change  
Anemic and/or inept leaders  
Balkanization of U.S. society, i.e., the end of consensus  
Big government, big media, big unions, big universities, big everything  
Bureaucracy  
Continuing crowding and hunger  
Corporate scandals and other criminal actions by authorities  
Crime  
Crisis of public education  
Death of the "free market"  
Dehumanization  
Eclipse of community  
End of the "melting pot" hypothesis  
Failure of "bigness"  
Failure of experts to agree  
Failure of Keynesian economics to deal with inflation  
Fragmentation—of life, work, ideas, solutions, world views, families  
Governmental regulation and costs of compliance  
Hedonism and/or meanspiritedness of people  
Hypocrisy of corporate America  
Inflation  
Legal and illegal "cover-ups"  
Literacy  
Media  
Moral/spiritual decline

New concepts of no-growth  
New concepts of growth  
Nuclear proliferation  
People cannot realize their potential, or "people are no damned good"  
Poverty  
Privacy and secrecy  
Restrictions of freedom  
Revolution of rising aspirations by the heretofore "disenfranchised"  
Reluctance to provide adequate financing for equalizing the above  
Scarcity  
Shift toward conservatism  
Shift toward a "planned state," i.e., socialism  
Taxpayers' revolts  
Technology  
Third World pressure for equity and "new international economic order"  
Treason of professionals, i.e., more concern with themselves than clients  
Twilight of the hydrocarbon era  
Unemployment  
Unwillingness to meet the Third and Fourth Worlds' basic needs  
Welfare and debt  
Women's movement and its effects  
Work has become soulless

every hospital in the nation, at least as many lawyers to staff the appeal process and at least twice the number of lobbyists.

### Cure-messes and cause-messes

Doing something about "health criminals" provides an example that makes it virtually impossible to disagree with the notion that the chief cause of problems is solutions. While that aphorism is itself too simplistic, it illustrates that we have amplified our pro-

blems into two messes: the "cure-mess" and the "cause-mess."

The former is created by attempts to ameliorate, if not eradicate, a cargo of past injustices. For the Ford Motor Company (and it is fairly representative of the industry) the cure-mess has led to recalling 1.5 million Pintos and the threat of more government regulation. The Ford case also highlights the truism that cornering the villain tends to block the view of what

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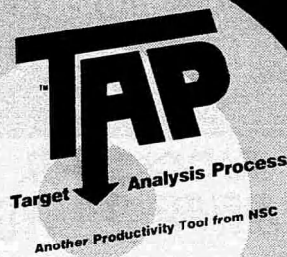
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led to the dreaded cure-mess in the first place.

Which brings us to the cause-mess, which singularly obsesses consumer advocates like Ralph Nader. Ever since the mounting evidence has come to light that Pinto models built during the early years are dangerously susceptible to fires and explosions if struck from the rear, they have advocated ever-stronger federal controls—and have similarly lost track of what caused it in the first place.

Confusion about messes causes not only sloppy cures and dumb “search and destroy” antics for villains, but worse, a chilling silence among too many citizens as the cure-/cause-mess arguments fly back and forth.

**Perennial predicaments**

Simplistic solutions are often forerunners of leaders who thrive on them. A number of observers now predict the possibility of a dictatorship as the fissures of our society deepen. The forecasts of fascist leadership concern me far less than its preconditions: our collective incapacity to tolerate ambiguity in the face of enormously complicated problems—an incapacity which too often leads to a hasty search for instant relief.

We’re faced with a confusing and overlapping set of predicaments which may have no “final solution”—unless they’re allowed to languish until legislative action comes down on us. A massive system failure often triggers a legislative reaction that is too extreme, unnuanced, and often ineffective. Lamenting about cure-messes instead of diagnosing the problem carefully beforehand will, inevitably, bring more cure-messes to lament about.

**A bright future for complexity**

I think an argument can be made for the importance of complexity—if we learn to use it to our advantage.

Predicaments represent one of the most basic characteristics of all successful modern societies—perhaps all living systems. They

keep alive alternatives that are antithetical to that moment’s dominant emphasis. Later, one alternative may submerge for a recess while another pole surfaces. “Without contraries,” Blake wrote, “there is no progression.” When predicaments cease, one must be especially vigilant, for a significant option may have been expunged.

The poet Luis Borges probably had that in mind when he quoted from “a certain Chinese encyclopedia,” which completely upends our present system of categories. He wrote:

“... animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”

Borges’ “Chinese encyclopedia” makes a shambles of our patterned responses. It complicates our lives as well by challenging us to start thinking about things that, if not new, are certainly different.

There’s little reason to expect simpler times in our future. Before we continue “throwing money” at problems or generally thrashing about, it might be wise to learn more about the complex root of our predicaments. Then we might learn more about why one thing works and another doesn’t.

“I predict a bright future for complexity” said a character in an E.B. White short story written more than 50 years ago. “Have you ever considered how complicated things can get, what with one thing always leading to another?”