This is the first two sections of chapter one, of *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster.*

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PLANNING IS PROSAIC

Everyone plans. We lie in bed in the morning and plan to get to work. We get to work and plan for the next meeting or whom to have lunch with or how to get home in the evening. We plan to make supper, we plan how to spend the night, we plan for the next day's work. Adults who don't plan are considered unstable.

Larger social units plan too. A youth organization plans to ask for money, a church plans to save souls, a corporation plans an expansion, a country plans a foreign invasion. Large social units that don't plan are judged ineffective, poorly managed, or sometimes just plain dumb.

Planning is not bounded by history or culture. Certainly the range of things for which people in modern times plan has widened. As social life gets more complex so does the variety of phenomena that demand forethought. Still, the great structures and conquests of Antiquity required extensive planning. Obvious examples are the Crusades, the European discovery of America, the pyramids, Stonehenge.

So planning is a prosaic, and ubiquitous, fact of life. It is always with us, in one way or another, because we are constantly either doing it ourselves or we are part of someone else's plan. Perhaps planning's mundanity is the reason it seems uninteresting. At best, we tend to think of planning as a fairly low-level activity that might warrant attention from policy analysts or perhaps industrial psychologists trying to fit people to organizational needs. As well, when scholars and commentators write about plans they most often see their work as an exercise in increasing organizational effectiveness, as a way to increase profit margins, or as a way to decrease job dissatisfaction. Such exercises can be quite important—who doesn't want more effective organizations?—but often aren't intellectually exciting.

This book is premised on quite the opposite view. I think there are many interesting things about planning, if we turn our gaze to the symbolic, in addition to the functional, aspects of it. The book's theme is that *organizations and experts use plans as forms of rhetoric, tools designed to convince audiences that they ought to believe what an organization says. In particular, some plans have so little instrumental utility in them that they warrant the label "fantasy document."*

I'll be particularly interested in how such plans are produced, why they're produced, and what would happen if they weren't produced. We will see that the production of fantasy documents always results from social interaction between two or more players. This is important to know because an easier way to think about the issue is that actors confront problems and try hard to reason out

possible solutions; from a list of such solutions, decision-makers pick the one they think is best. Academics know this way of thinking as the rational model of decision making, and it concentrates so heavily on the instrumental aspects of people's behavior that it has nothing positive to say about symbolism.

We will also see the influence of complex organizations on the production of plans and on how people behave. This is important to know because most of us are used to thinking in either individualistic or institutional terms. An example of the former is when we assume that the U.S. President actually controls the government; an example of the latter is when we assume that The Government is a unitary actor. We don't usually see how forces that are intrinsic to complex organizations shape how people think and act. Of course, there is always a lot of negotiation, social conflict, and disagreement behind the face of any organization. But organizational forces can be so strong that it often makes good sense to speak of organizations as if *they* were unitary actors. When I talk as if organizations act I will be using a shorthand language that emphasizes the strength of those forces.[1]

To focus on symbolic planning is to neglect what is perhaps the predominant model of planning in organizational social science. That model, which usually goes by the name of rational actor theory, argues that the conduct, character, and creation of plans follows the demands of the task. Such arguments—that the character of the problem determines the solution—have a long history in social science. We have a lot of research on better planning, more efficient planning, or more participatory planning, depending on an author's practical or political commitments. The usual presumption in social science is that the first step in an adequate planning process is to assess fairly completely what the problem is; the second step is to write a plan that addresses, and hopefully will solve, the problem; the final step is to implement the plan. In this sequence it isn't hard to see common-sense lurking in the background, which perhaps explains why so much writing on planning is so dull.

I think that such rational, common-sense planning is possible under conditions of relatively low uncertainty. When information about problems can be easily gathered, and when that information can be trusted, then it is possible to create plans that might reasonably be expected to work. When uncertainly is low, it is easier to gather good empirical knowledge and to develop good theories to make sense of that knowledge. Good data and good theories, in turn, enable better prediction and thus better planning for the future.

Of course, there are problems that are *moderately* uncertain. Consider the following issues, all rife with uncertainty, all characterized by good science on all sides of the arguments, and all of which entail considerable political disagreement:[2]

- Will environmental change create imbalances of power between developed and developing societies? And if so, in what direction?
- Will burgeoning populations from poor countries create massive numbers of environmental refugees to rich countries?

[1]One thing the book is not: a basic work in how to characterize and explain rhetoric *per se*. Some scholars make a fine living in that pursuit, and while I find much of the work on Rhetoric without institutional sensibility, I leave critical evaluation of that work to others (see for instance, Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Questions*.

[2]Some of these come from a fine article by Thomas F. Homer-Dixon (1991) on environment and social conflict.

- Will global warming create terrific food shortages and attendant Malthusian horrors?

Predicting how environments change, and how environmental change will affect political organizations, requires taking account of a large number of variables. The same goes for arguments about global warming. The problems are exacerbated because the science for each of the issues isn't hard and fast, and besides, the problems are just *so big* that planning and prediction for them is nearly Herculean. Herculean but not impossible. It *is* possible to get evidence on deforestation, degradation of agriculture, types of social conflict, and flooding. These are moderately uncertain issues because directly relevant data, and relatively good theories, are available, or conceivably could be available, with sufficient amounts of scientific and political attention, and money.

Under conditions of *high* uncertainty, however, the nature of planning changes in major ways. Under highly uncertain conditions rational planning becomes more difficult. Planning becomes more difficult because the vision of the future that it entails will likely be distorted by inadequate or corrupt data, and because the conceptual scheme brought to bear on those data is poor. When important aspects of the future are not or can not be known, planning is shorn of its most functional aspects (knowing what "important" means is part of effective planning). This is not to say that planning under high uncertainty can't in principle *be* effective. It is to say that the ability to know what constitutes effectiveness is terribly low or nonexistent. The importance of planning's symbolism then increases, relative to a plan's likelihood of being realized. In fact, under conditions of high uncertainty the promise and apparatus of rational planning itself becomes mainly rhetorical, becomes a means by which plans—independently of their functional relevance to the task—can be justified as reasonable promises that exigencies can be controlled. When uncertainty about key aspects of a task is high, rationalistic plans and rational-looking planning processes become rationality badges, labels proclaiming that organizations and experts can control things that are, most likely, without the range of their expertise. Planning then becomes a sign that organizations hang on themselves advertising their competence and forethought, announcing to all who would listen, "We know what this problem is and we know how to solve it. Trust us." Thus do organizations try to control the uncontrollable.

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SYMBOLIC PLANNING

Operational planning is what we usually think about when we bother to think about planning at all. Individuals and organizations expend considerable strategic energy in making functional plans that realize interests, utilities, or profits. But there are cases where the plan and the planning process themselves are the function. In those cases planning is more symbolically than functionally useful, the plans representing something other than an operational capability to imagine the future and prepare for it.

Of course, all action can be infused with symbolic importance, so even the most mundane of plans can be imbued with surplus meaning. Anyone who has ever

encountered an over-zealous bureaucrat insisting on adherence to a trivial rule will quickly recognize the surfeit of symbolism in everyday documents. "It's not in your strategic plan, so you can't expand in that market," says the CEO, using the plan as a symbol of rational planning to justify a decision she has reached on other grounds. Still, it's useful to distinguish between functional and symbolic planning. Were there no such thing as truly functional planning nothing could ever get done.

Plans are a form of language, a way of expressing or communicating some thing. That "thing" can be anything from a claim about some mundane activity that will happen tomorrow (e.g. an appointment book) to a claim that super-knowledge allows experts to make decisions about a very vague future (e.g. the US Department of Energy's plans to bury high level radioactive waste safely). In any case, language, and hence a plan, is meaningful when it is shared. Language must be directed at someone else and that someone must share the meaning if what is being communicated is to be more than incoherent gibberish.

From this view planning is an inherently interactive, social process. As books, speeches, and curses are directed at others, so are plans. Some plans then are much more than blueprints for future action, they are also rhetorical devices used in campaigns of persuasion. Symbolically, plans are public declarations that planners, or planning organizations, have deliberated carefully about some problem and have developed the requisite wisdom and power to establish dominion over it.

To make a plan is to claim expertise because planning, especially high-technology planning, requires that organizations and experts lay claim to mastery and thoughtfulness about some issue. Since claims to expertise are always claims that somebody should be left out of the decision loop, planning is deeply, unavoidably political. This little-noticed, almost invisible political character of planning is something that figures prominently in the pages to follow.[3]

So symbolic plans, which I call fantasy documents, are rhetorical instruments that have political utility in reducing uncertainty for organizations and experts. Earlier I asked, with Stinchcombe, "uncertainty about what?" I can now answer the question more specifically: the key uncertainties that fantasy documents are trying to turn into risks have to do with how future events will evolve, and how future actors will respond to those events. Fantasy documents are thus based on an underlying sociological theory of events, meanings, and behaviors. Soon, I'll argue that the key mechanism through which such theories are expressed are "apparent affinities," claims that a catastrophic possibility is sufficiently like something we already know as to allow operational planning to proceed.

Plans for recovery after general nuclear war are fantasy documents because the knowledge and experience necessary to know what would make for a realistic plan are unavailable. Those who propose the reality of nuclear war civil defense plans must assert their claims without knowing key details about how nuclear war would actually play out. The actual war plans are secret, though much is obvious too, about what would be hit. Still the knowledge is hardly precise. The same goes for blast yields, the number of bombs, whether the bombs explode in air or on

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[3] There *is* recognition that this happens among some urban planners. For an example, and also an analysis of connections between rhetoric and urban planning, see James A. Throgmorton's *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling*, especially Chapter 2, "The argumentative or rhetorical turn in planning."

ground, time of year and so on. All these uncertainties mean that projections of societal recovery are in large measure outright guesses. And there is nothing our risk estimators can do to lessen their decisional burden.

Plans for evacuating after (or during) a total meltdown of the Shoreham nuclear power station on Long Island—the second of my three main cases—were fantasy documents for much the same reasons that civil defense plans are fantasies. While mass evacuations are indeed, it would be impossible to test the key parts of the Long Island Lighting Company's plan in any way.

Plans for containing and cleaning up massive oil spills—my last main case—on the open seas are fantasy documents because such response is quite impossible. We haven't the requisite knowledge or technology to respond to such spills, and that's why there's never been a major oil spill success story.

The following chapters tell stories of how some plans are created, used, and fought over. Those stories in turn tell us some things about symbolism, rhetoric, and rationality in modern, beautiful, horrific, bureaucratized societies. In the next chapter are the main fantasies I am concerned with, followed by a chapter on non-fantasy documents. After that, I show how organizations and self-appointed experts change conceptual terms of debate to make their plans look more reasonable, transforming incredible uncertainties into quite manageable risks. Then I delve into the histories of social conflict behind fantasy documents; these are the social histories without which the fantasies would not be constructed. In the last chapter, I talk about the meaning of the evidence for how we understand organizations and symbols, the construction of expertise, and the consequences of fantasy documents.