

THE INEVITABILITY OF THE UNEXPECTED

By Michael Ventura

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Rule 1: The unexpected always happens.

It is never possible to foretell every possibility.

Rule 2: Safety is not a human option.

To call anything “safe” is only to state that it is safe relative to what is expected. But sooner or later Rule #1 soars in with the unexpected.

Rule 3: History always misbehaves.

“History” is commonly defined as the past, but really, it is a mode of behavior, the collective behavior of human beings romping with one another and with the planet.

History is a continuous interaction in the unavoidable present: intense, ongoing, multi, always defying expectations, one surprise after another.

Off the top of my head, here’s a list of history’s surprises just in my lifetime:

In 1945, at the end of World War II, few expected the shattered nations of Europe – nations that warred with each other for centuries – to form a common union and abolish conventional war on that continent.

In 1960, the youth of the United States was commonly described as a gaggle of TV-hypnotized conformists lacking originality. By 1966, these young folks were busily overturning every assumption of mainstream culture to create undreamed-of possibilities that set in motion this last half-century of cultural flux.

In 1969 United States astronauts landed on the moon. Everyone expected that by 2011, we’d have colonized Mars. No one expected that it would be the Chinese who planned seriously for space expeditions while the U.S. effort faltered and decayed.

In 1969, homosexuality was against the law throughout this country. No one imagined gay pride parades in every major city, gay media stars, or that gays would redefine gender and marriage.

In 1970, the Internet was in its infancy while personal computers and smartphones were the stuff of science fiction. Who reckoned that they would revolutionize the conditions of gainful employment throughout the developed world?

In 1974, when Republican President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace, Democratic liberalism expected to triumph in our society. No one predicted that right-wing Republicanism would again and again be the deciding factor in United States politics for the next half century.

In 1979, no one in the West expected that a religious fundamentalist revolution in Iran (or anywhere) could happen, much less that it could alter the geopolitics of the entire world.

When CNN originated the 24-hour TV news cycle in 1980, no one imagined that this would transform and degrade the political processes of the United States to the point of dysfunction and incoherence.

In 1988, no one expected that in 1989 the people of Eastern Europe would take to the streets, topple the Soviet bloc, and soon cause the dissolution of a superpower like the Soviet Union.

In 2000, no one expected that the United States, with its dominant claim to superpower status and its balanced budget, would become a crippled, crazed giant just a damned decade later.

As late as 2000, no one expected that by 2011 China would surpass Japan to become the world's second-largest economy, well on the way to surpassing the United States in world influence.

I was born in 1945. In roughly a third of this country, blacks and whites drank from different fountains and pissed in different bathrooms. Racial discrimination was legal and rampant. As for sexism, girls in my high school class figured they'd be housewives, teachers, nurses, or maybe actresses. It was beyond our rowdiest dreams that a white woman and a black man would vie for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, or that, in our lifetimes, a person of color could win the White House.

No one dreamed that this country would ever have a nonwhite majority, but in a generation it will.

In 2010, no expert in geopolitics took Tunisia seriously (or gave much thought to Tunisia at all), and no one imagined that in 2011 a Tunisian people's movement could ignite the Muslim world and turn United States plans for the Middle East into blank pages.

In January's State of the Union address, "President Obama proposed giving the nuclear construction business a type of help it has never had, a role in a quota for clean energy" (*The New York Times*, Feb. 1, p. B1). Prospects for the nuclear-energy business were higher than they'd been in decades. Not two months later, who wants to live within 50 miles of a nuke? As I write, no one knows what catastrophe is cooking in Japan's Fukushima Daiichi plant. It rode out the earthquake fairly well, but no one expected that tsunami to breach the nuke's seawall and swamp the plant's backup generators. "They brought in diesel generators but they had the wrong plugs," said a commentator on CBS's *Up to the Minute* (March 16). "Experts say it is impossible to forecast how events at Japan's stricken nuclear plant will unfold... And even if [a large release of radioactivity] occurred, the impact in Japan and elsewhere would depend greatly on wind and rain..." (*The New York Times*, March 16, p.A14)

It started with an inevitable but unpredictable event of the Earth, continued with an equally inevitable and unpredictable event of the sea, and the outcome may depend upon the often-predictable but always-uncontrollable ways of wind and rain.

The unexpected always happens.

There is more under the surface than on the surface. There is more happening backstage than onstage. There is more possibility than we can imagine. The unexpected always happens.

Not that the expected doesn't happen. But the unexpected always comes along to change the equation, introduce new elements, and extend the parameters.

"There is more to history than politics," wrote William Irwin Thompson in *At the Edge of History*. "Politics is to civilization what the ego is to the self."

Politics is one way we attempt to manage and deal with history, but history is far larger than politics. Media culture – its template generated in the United States and imitated worldwide – emphasizes politics and hot-button issues above all else, but so many other forces are at work, so many other elements are in play, so many more facets of which politicians seem unaware and which the usual linear analyses cannot include.

The inevitability of the unexpected makes pessimism and optimism equally pointless.

No one is terribly optimistic about the United States these days, with many a good reason. Our education stinks, our youth are deemed directionless, we're broke, and the middle class is being systematically destroyed by a corporate culture that buys government at will while an angry, insecure populace believes whatever suits its emotions regardless of the facts.

But the future may lie in the anomalies. For instance, kids who supposedly can't read devour thick *Harry Potter* novels. Books are supposedly passé, but they are all ablaze on Kindles. In the conservative bastion where I live – Lubbock, Texas – interracial and interethnic couples and families cause no ripples and rate no second glances.

What many fear most is what I find most encouraging: No one can guess what can or will happen next. Every year, unexpected developments clobber sanctioned assumptions.

Whatever happens, our expectations will be reframed and defined by the unexpected because the unexpected always happens, and, as individuals and as a species, this has always been our greatest danger and our best chance.

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