

Editor's Introduction

"Those of us whose profession is the search for understanding, however, must learn to live with self-exposure. Just as understanding is gained by unrelenting exposure of one's unconscious, so also can understanding be aided by exposure of one's conscious assumptions."

—Ithiel Pool, p. 127, below

"Every road sign that says, 'Caution, dangerous intersection' is hopefully a self-defeating forecast."

—Ithiel Pool, p. 151, below

"The International System in the Next Half-Century" and "The Art of the Social Science Soothsayer"

In the mid-1960s Ithiel Pool was invited to participate in an exercise to forecast the future of the international political system during the next fifty years. The invitation resulted in the first selection, "The International System in the Next Half-Century." In the next decade his MIT colleague, Nazli Choucri, co-edited a book about forecasting in international relations, followed-up the initial article, and invited Ithiel to contribute the second selection, with reflections about how his predictions were turning-out and the enterprise of social science forecasting.¹

Pool's publication of his forecasts was unusual: outside of economics, the prospect of tying one's professional reputation, in print, to predictions—that could be widely seen to be wrong—can engender immediate caution among social scientists, and at least a passing protestation of professional modesty. Pool was right—such exercises are

good intellectual discipline, to be forthrightly recommended. (But in the past 35 years, almost no senior political scientist has done it again.)

Ithiel Pool's early death prevented further essays in later decades to review his initial assumptions about the forces that would shape world politics and what he had learned. Several of the original predictions that raised eyebrows at the time—e.g., the breakup of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of Russia's hold on Eastern Europe, and the weakening of Communist ideology in China—have come to pass, and it would be instructive to know whether Ithiel had deeper insight (and how!), or was just lucky.

The reader may find it an interesting exercise to infer Ithiel's conscious assumptions and causal theories as a basis for his or her own predictions for the next fifty years after reading this essay. For example:

- At the time, he obviously believed that deeper historical forces produce long-term trends and that individual leaders—even great men—have less importance. The passing of DeGaulle and Mao, he forecast, would make a noticeable difference, but system-level theories and processes would explain the future of their countries in the long run.
- The prediction of political instability and violence in sub-Saharan Africa could be inferred as a straightforward prediction from the record of earlier decades and the continuation of local factors that political scientists had identified as contributing to past instability and violence. It is the application of a research-based “tomorrow will be like yesterday” method.
- He perceives a genuine, although slow, capacity to learn in the international political system, e.g., a growing use of UN forces for interventions in Africa.
- His predictions reflect a judgment that Communism could not survive in the long-run given the limitations of state planning for economic prosperity, a desire for freedom, and a preference for older national and ethnic/sectional loyalties.²

The follow-up essay, a decade later, becomes more reflective about forecasting. It begins to discuss new dimensions, especially the importance of self-fulfilling prophecies and self-defeating prophecies, that were emerging from Pool's new research to forecast the social and political impacts of new telecommunications technology. For example, at the conclusion of the third selection (below), “Foresight and Hind-sight: Forecasting the Telephone,” there is an early visionary memo-

randum from Alexander Graham Bell to his investors. It hopes to become—and did become!—a self-fulfilling prophecy—foreseeing a possible future (currently unfeasible and impossible) that *could* be created by assembling the necessary pieces (e.g., capital investments, further inventions) that discussion of the vision could help to call forth.

At the time, Pool also was writing his book, *Technologies of Freedom*, that was designed to influence the future by making a forecast that he wanted to become self-defeating. Pool's book argued that the legal doctrines that justified earlier regulation of telecommunications technology could produce an extraordinary restriction of freedom if they were—as he predicted could happen—extended thoughtlessly to cover new, digital forms of electronic communication (e.g., including the Internet, but also more traditional methods such as newspapers that would rely upon digital technology). His book defined thinking about these issues (i.e., that freedom of speech was the key issue) and he proposed new policy guidelines that would, if adopted, make the forecast wrong. He seems to have succeeded in defeating his own prophecy, which he had hoped to do (an issue that is discussed in my contribution to this volume, "What's Next?," below).

"Foresight and Hindsight: The Case of the Telephone"

This third selection presents a retrospective technology assessment, an innovative method to use historical cases to improve social science. In this study, Ithiel Pool and a team of his graduate students returned to the early years of the telephone to determine which methods, used by prognosticators and business investors at the time, successfully predicted its social and economic impacts. (Today, it seems obvious that the telephone would spread and be used for voice communications, but this future was not obvious to most people at the time of Bell's invention.) The story is too good to substitute my brief summary. At this point, I will simply recommend that the reader can apply a retrospective assessment to the development and spread of personal computers, the Internet, or success of new types of software, as these were forecast at any time during the past decades. Who—if anybody—got the developments and their social and political impacts right? How did they know?

Notes

1. Choucri, Nazli and Robinson, Thomas W. (eds.), *Forecasting in international relations: Theory, methods, problems, prospects*. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1978). For an overview of the development of forecasting methods, see this volume and William Ascher, *Forecasting: An appraisal for policy-makers and planners*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
2. Ithiel Pool was a consultant to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America during the Cold War. Their short-wave radio broadcasts emphasized such issues to build a case, among their listeners, for such steps. Whether Pool had access to classified knowledge about trends, or was making a prediction that he hoped would contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy, or both, is unclear.