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Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change Contribution to GTI Forum [Which Future Are We Living In?](#)

Gus Speth

Moving the telescope across the landscape, one sees today a mix of all [six futures](#) detailed in the 2002 [Great Transition essay](#) almost everywhere one looks, in varying degrees. But there does seem to be one dominant “present,” and that is [Market Forces](#). Certainly, that is true in the United States, where [Policy Reform](#) struggles to get a foothold. That foothold is present yet quite weak nationally, albeit stronger in some states like California and New York. With varying degrees of nation-state involvement around the globe, market capitalism is today’s dominant system of political economy. Conventional World rules the day. We have not escaped it.

But where we are is, of course, not necessarily where we are headed. The “we” here becomes important. Blessed are those who can assess far-away developments, but even after a spell in the United Nations and visits to 115 countries, I cannot.

I will focus here on the United States. Here, we must look at the first and second derivatives: which futures are growing in likelihood and which are picking up speed.

One clear feature of the US landscape, as I have recounted [elsewhere](#), is the increasing probability of a combination of [Fortress World](#) and social, environmental, and political [Breakdowns](#). It would be straightforward to add the evidence for this—a catalogue of many dispiriting things happening in this country since, say, 1980.

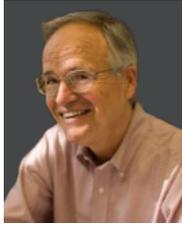
[Naomi Klein](#), [Thomas Homer-Dixon](#), and others have urged us to get crisis-ready, given that big shocks are surely coming, but there is not much evidence that that preparation is happening. Even on one of the most visible of these crises, climate change, there is precious little real planning. The US has no national plan of action on either the mitigation or adaptation fronts.

Forewarned certainly does not mean forearmed.

Another and more hopeful alternative gaining strength on the American ground is [Eco-communalism](#), at least if that label can be used for the remarkable array of neighborhood, community, city, state, and regional initiatives now underway across the country. Many of these initiatives are marching under the banner of the [Solidarity Economy](#). My [impression](#) is that this version of Eco-Communalism is more advanced in a number of places around the world than it is in the United States.

If this is correct, what seems to be emerging is a foot race: can Policy Reform (from the top) and Eco-communalism (from the bottom) move fast enough to head off the emerging crises and system failures leading to Fortress World and Breakdowns? Despite the ways in which fast-evolving crises like the climate emergency can severely curtail positive possibilities, I [believe](#) there is still hope for the prospect of system change to a New Paradigm future, but we must make huge greenhouse gas reductions now through Policy Reform for that to remain feasible.

About the Author



Gus Speth is an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute and co-chair of the Next System Project at the Democracy Collaborative. He has served as a professor at Vermont Law School and Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. From 1993 to 1999, Speth was Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group. Previously, he was founder and president of the World Resources Institute, professor of law at Georgetown University, chairman of the US Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter Administration, and co-founder of and senior attorney at the National Resources Defense Council. He currently serves on the boards of the New Economy Coalition, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Climate Reality Project. He is the author, co-author, or editor of seven books, including *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* and *Angels by the River*.

About the Publication

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