President’s Message: Continuity and Change

The Council on Foreign Relations has, for nearly a century, remained steadfast to its mission of providing authoritative analysis of the foreign policy choices facing the United States. CFR’s tradition of intellectual diversity is underpinned by its principles of nonpartisanship and independence, traits emphasized by our co-chairs in their essay.

While this continuity is worth celebrating, any leading institution must also adapt. Management expert Jim Collins writes that great organizations that endure are characterized by a fundamental duality: “a set of timeless core values and core reason for being that remain constant over long periods of time” and “a relentless drive for change and progress” that enables the organization to adapt to an always-evolving world. All of us associated with CFR are mindful of balancing these twin objectives as we strive to contribute to and compete in the marketplace of ideas.

We do not want to change too much by moving away from the principles and activities that have brought the institution to preeminence. Our commitment is to be a resource to help our members and others better understand the world. And CFR accomplishes this by doing what it does best: convene meetings with senior government officials, global business and civil society leaders, and prominent thinkers; sponsor Independent Task Forces; provide up-to-date analysis of world events on its website, CFR.org; support scholarly work by its fellows in the David Rockefeller Studies Program; and publish Foreign Affairs, by all counts the best magazine in the business.

While we continue to evaluate traditional foreign policy topics from nuclear nonproliferation and Europe’s economic uncertainty to the rise of China and conflict in the Middle East, we are also turning our attention to emerging issues such as noncommunicable diseases, girls’ education and maternal health, the consequences of the information and communications revolutions, and the interplay of civil society, economic markets, and democracy.

We have also been focusing on the domestic underpinnings of U.S. power—a notable intellectual departure for a foreign policy organization. Premised on the understanding that the United States’ ability to influence world events rests on a robust, competitive economy and a prepared citizenry, CFR’s Renewing America initiative looks at how to revitalize the country’s economic strength and build the foundations for future prosperity and international influence. The initiative concentrates on six issues: debt and deficits; infrastructure; education and human capital; corporate regulation and taxation; innovation; and international trade and investment.

In response to the ever-shifting information landscape, we are incorporating cutting-edge strategies to produce and distribute content tailored for new constituencies. We are using infographics, chart books, and interactives to visually illustrate complex issues and major economic trends. CFR scholars connect with new and growing audiences on an array of social media platforms through their blogs, Twitter feeds,
Facebook profiles, and the like. I am glad to say that we are being recognized for our innovation: For the second year in a row, CFR.org was awarded Best Use of Online Multimedia by the Overseas Press Club, this time for “Crisis Guide: Iran,” the latest multimedia feature in the Emmy Award–winning series.

In addition to virtual networking, CFR launched the Council of Councils, a group of prominent international organizations—from some two dozen countries in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Australia—to generate ideas to promote governance and multilateral coordination at both the global and regional levels. Between annual conferences, the Council of Councils will maintain an ongoing dialogue, including regional meetings and a monthly Global Roundup of opinion on CFR.org.

CFR is also reaching beyond traditional foreign policy circles by bringing together interested citizens whose voices are increasingly important to policy debates. These constituencies include educators and students, religious and congregational leaders, and state and local officials. Our outreach aims to connect these groups with CFR’s resources that can help them better fulfill their respective missions. This year, we convened our first Educators Workshop as a forum for academics to share ideas and to solicit feedback on the utility of our materials for the classroom.

A thorough breakdown of the year’s activities follows in the “2012 Highlights” section of this Annual Report. Implicit in this summary is that CFR is a valued, authoritative resource on foreign policy—directly, in terms of meetings with policymakers; and perhaps more important, indirectly, in terms of helping to shape the context in which foreign policy is discussed and made. CFR scholars, events, and publications inform serious debate on global issues by offering facts, analysis, and, where appropriate, prescriptions, but taking no institutional point of view.

It is hard not to be impressed by the breadth and depth of all that we do. None of this would be possible without the time and effort of a good many extraordinary individuals. I want to thank Co-Chairs Carla A. Hills and Robert E. Rubin, Vice Chairman Richard E. Salomon, newly appointed Vice Chairman David M. Rubenstein, and members of the Board of Directors for their leadership of and dedication to this institution. I also want to acknowledge the efforts of the dedicated CFR staff in New York and Washington, DC. What they do and how they do it, day in and day out, is truly admirable.

Richard N. Haass
President