The Future and Its Enemies (CSPAN Interview)

Virginia Postrel

Jan 19, 1999

Contents

Discussion Synopsis **3**

Book Synopsis **4**

Transcript **5**

Discussion Synopsis

Ms. Postrel talked about her book, *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress*, published by Free Press. She postulated that world-views should be defined, not by how they view the present, but how they view the future. Topics included dynamism vs. stasis in an open society, and the politics of the future. Ms. Postrel argued that the biggest threat to the environment, technology, and economic development is trying to shape the future in advance. She said that we should rely on creativity as opposed to conforming to one central vision as we deal with the issues of the next century.

Book Synopsis

Today we have greater wealth, health, opportunity, and choice than at any time in history—the fruits of human ingenuity, curiosity, and perseverance. Yet a chorus of intellectuals and politicians loudly laments our condition. Technology, they say, enslaves us. Economic change makes us insecure. Popular culture coarsens and brutalizes us. Consumerism despoils the environment. The future, they say, is dangerously out of control, and unless we rein in these forces of change and guide them closely, we risk disaster. In *The Future and Its Enemies,* Virginia Postrel explodes these myths, embarking on a bold exploration of how progress really occurs. In areas of endeavor ranging from fashion to fisheries, from movies to medicine, from contact lenses to computers, she shows how and why unplanned, open-ended trial and error—not conformity to one central vision—is the key to human betterment. Thus, the true enemies of humanity's future are those who insist on prescribing outcomes in advance, circumventing the process of competition and experiment in favor of their own preconceptions and prejudices.
—*from the publisher's website*

Transcript

Brian Lamb: Virginia Postrel, author of "The Future and Its Enemies," you say in the acknowledgment section that your husband came up with that title.

Virginia Postrel: That's right. "The Future and Its Enemies," which I think is a great title–and a lot of people think its a great title–is an allusion to a famous book called "The Open Society And Its Enemies," by Karl Popper. And what I'm talking about in the book is the open society, very much so and yet calling it the future has that ring, and that it's about how we make progress and how we move into the future in a dynamic, rather than static way.

Brian: All right. You say also in the acknowledgments that, 'I have spent countless hours discussing this book with my beloved partner in life and work with whom I spent countless hours.' Who is your husband?

Virginia: My husband is Steven Postrel. He's a PhD economist who teaches business strategy at UC Irvine down in Orange County. We live in Los Angeles. We met when we were 18 years old, freshmen at Princeton. And we've been, you know, we're just kind of soul mates, and–intellectual and otherwise.

Brian: So is this a wonk marriage?

Virginia: We're not just wonks. We're interested in big ideas, but you know, we enjoy–we have a lot of fun, too. It's not just policy wonkery.

Brian: Were did you get the idea for the book?

Virginia: Well, it goes back to a 1990 piece I did for The Washington Post. I didn't start working on the book till '95, but–back in 1990 I was very interested, as a lot of people were, in the environmental movement. It was the 20th anniversary of Earth Day. And I took a sort of less wonky approach. I went back and read a lot of green theorists, people–not people saying, you know, 'What should we do about air pollution,' but people saying, you know, 'What is the right way for societies to be.' And I was very struck by the idea of stasis, in that idea–in that writing, people like E.F. Schumacher, author of "Small Is Beautiful" probably would be the best known person.

But this idealization of society as a steady state, as the way that human beings ought to live being in a world without change. And the idea of nature is also static of having sort of a balance, or climax phase. And I started to notice this idea of stasis cropping up in other areas–attitudes towards trade, for example. And started seeing little beginnings of left-right crossovers. And got interested in that, and then got interested in the idea of, 'Well, what is the opposite vision of that'? And came up with this idea of dynamism, and I was seeing some left-right crossovers there as well, particularly on open economy issues.

I wrote this piece saying that, you know, 'The political landscape is changing,' this bold thing. And I predicted–in addition to talking about environmental stuff, I predicted that international trade and immigration, which at that time were kind of issues that only interest groups and a few specialists worried about, I predicted that they would become hot button issues and issues that would divide and create new coalitions along this stasis vs. dynamism division. And, in fact, that happened.

And I continued to think and speak about these ideas. And then in 1995 I decided, you know, I should really develop them and talk about what it means to have a political landscape divided, not between left and right, but between an open-ended vision of the future vs. some notion that it should be controlled or managed or perhaps kept stable in a past form.

Brian: All right. This probably isn't correct English–the funnest fact for me in this book was that 80 percent of all the doughnut shops in California are owned by Cambodians.

Virginia: That's right. Now I have...

Brian: Where did you get that?

Virginia: I got it from an article in The Wall Street Journal, a very good piece, that was on the growth of the doughnut industry in California. And it is something you notice there, I mean, if you live there and you occasionally go into a doughnut shop, particularly. If it's not the chain stores, they are mostly owned by Cambodian families.

And what happened, apparently, was there was a Cambodian refugee, sometime after the war, who came to Southern California, as many Southeast Asians did, and he got a job in a doughnut shop. And he started to think that this would be a really good business for him because you didn't need to know a lot of English. You basically needed to work hard, and it wasn't that much capital to get into the business. So he got into the business, and he then–other people started working for him and it spread through the ethnic community. The knowledge about how to make doughnuts and they developed specialized suppliers. And they kind of built this market. It's not just that they sort of took over existing doughnut shops. They did that some, they bought them out, but they expanded the market for doughnuts. And this is an example of how, you know, the economy grows in a very unexpected way. You know what I mean? Because doughnuts are not a Cambodian food. This was a sort of chance occurrence.

Brian: So how do you apply all kinds of economic theory to that?

Virginia: Well, this can, if you want to use a highfalutin term, this is an example of what economists call past dependence, which is that some seemingly random occurrence sort of sets history of an industry off on a–in a particular direction. So that–and then skilled begun–and networks begin to be created. And it becomes more likely that a Cambodian will get into the doughnut shop –into doughnut business than, say, into the acrylic nail–into the nail salon business, which is dominated by Vietnamese people in Los Angeles.

Brian: The nail–what'd you say again?

Virginia: The nail salons–manicurists, which I don't write about in the book, but I've written about elsewhere. And then it's also more likely that–it's less likely that somebody who's not a Cambodian will get into it. It's not impossible. I mean, there are people who are not Cambodians who open doughnut shops. But it is an example of the sort of unpredictability of the way the economy works.

Brian: And why do you use that–what reason do you use the Cambodian doughnut owners in this book?

Virginia: Well, one reason is to explain about how history matters, that we don't start off from scratch. We don't make progress from starting over from scratch, that that's a false idea that we've had about history and about progress in the past.

Another is–another point that I make–where it's interesting that they're Cambodians, is that they were escaping from a static utopia. The Khmer Rouge sought to start over at year zero, and to sort of create the kind of society that very civilized, humane greens write about as though it were an ideal. I mean, people who would never consider genocide. But I argue that if you want to know what that would take, look at Cambodia–to empty the cities and turn everyone into peasants again. Even in a less developed country, let alone in someplace like the United States, that these sort of static utopian fantasies are just that.

Brian: How long have you been associated with this?

Virginia: Reason magazine? I came to Reason magazine in 1986, and I've been the editor since 1989–mid 1989.

Brian: Who's the audience?

Virginia: Oh–it's anybody—the magazine motto is 'Free minds and free markets,' so it has that sort of political orientation. It's a monthly magazine about politics, culture and ideas. The audience is a very dispersed one. We have a strong audience is Washington, but we also have a very strong audience among what we would call grass roots opinion leaders, you know, the kind of people who watch C-SPAN, take an interest in current affairs. We have a particular strong segment of our audience–it's not by any means all of it, of people who are in various kinds of technology, jobs and ventures.

What the exact association is between that and the ideas of the magazine is something that we always puzzle over. I mean, at this point it's sort of like the Cambodian doughnut shops. Because of that interest on our audience, we tend to write a little bit more about those issues which are increasingly important in the political debates. And so, therefore, we get more readers of that nature. But we cover a full range of topics.

Brian: Where did you get the name Reason?

Virginia: Well–I mean, Reason was found in 1968 when I was in the third grade, so I didn't get the name Reason. But it was originally founded as a student publication at Boston University by a student who was a great devotee of Ayn Rand's work. And so she supported the idea of Reason, so he took the name from that. And I think having that name has encouraged the magazine to have a certain tone. I mean, we try not to have the same tone throughout. We try to have, you know, variety and humor and

different voices. But I think we address issues–we try to address issues in a sort of rational way, in a way that appeals to people's intellects as well as to their passions.

Brian: Where did you grow up?

Virginia: I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina.

Brian: What did your parents do?

Virginia: My father was an engineer and worked for a polyester film manufacturing company. My mother when I was–most of my childhood when I was growing up, my mother was a full-time mother with a vast range of volunteer activities. When I was in high school, she went back to graduate school and got her master's in English, and taught English at the college level for a number of years. And now she's primarily a poet and fiction writer.

Brian: When did you get interested in–first in things intellectual? Do you remember?

Virginia: I don't know. I mean, I guess it would depend on what you meant by things intellectual. I mean...

Brian: Were you a student in high school?

Virginia: Oh, yes. I was always...

Brian: Were you a good student?

Virginia: I was always a very good student, very serious about my–I always loved to read. And I was always interested in politics, I mean, always. I remember the Kennedy assassination, even though I was almost four. I mean, obviously my knowledge of John Kennedy was more that he had kids my age than, you know, what his policy was vis-a-vis Cuba. But, I was always interested in ideas and history and politics and literature.

Brian: Did you start off being of a party?

Virginia: Well, I was–when I was in high school, I was a Democrat. I worked–the only campaign I've ever worked in my life was Charles Ravenel's campaign against Strom Thurmond in 1978, which was my senior year in high school.

When I was in college–by that time my views had actually evolved quite a bit. I was not as liberal as I had been earlier, and–particularly on economic issues. I always had this libertarian streak. I was always a big civil libertarian. When I was in college, I was more or less a Republican, although I was never active in the Republican Party politics.

Brian: Where?

Virginia: Princeton. And now I'm an independent. So I have been, you know, across the political spectrum. But there's been–there has been a consistency in my thinking, in the sense that I was always very concerned with issues of individual liberty. And it was a matter of understanding how those play out in the world.

Brian: So you're an independent. What does that mean?

Virginia: Well, that just means–I mean, it is a party. You asked me about party.

Brian: So you don't belong to a party?

Virginia: I'm not registered with a party.

Brian: If you had to put a label on you today, what would it be? Would it fit any–I mean, you said free markets and all that.

Virginia: Well, I would say classical liberal, or libertarian. Or, as I say in the book, dynamist, which is a term that's a little broader than...

Brian: Did you invent that term?

Virginia: I did invent that term.

Brian: Dynamist?

Virginia: Dynamist. Trying to get at the idea of people who support this open-ended idea of progress through decentralized trial and error, as opposed to through some type of planning or through saying that progress is a myth. And so I would say that most libertarians are dynamists, but not all dynamists are libertarians.

Brian: And you have a set of rules on page 116 on what a dynamist is. Is that right? You say, 'An overview dynamist, Rule One: Allow Individuals, including groups of individuals, to act on their own knowledge.' What does that mean?

Virginia: Well, there's actually a whole chapter. This is chapter five, which follows chapter four, which is on knowledge. There are very different visions of knowledge in these static and dynamic visions. The static notion–I use the analogy of a tree. The static notion is like this–these palm trees we have out in Los Angeles. And knowledge is this big trunk that everybody kind of knows, and then there's a little bit of specificity at the top of a few little fronds. And that, therefore, it's very easy to plan the future for society to sort of tell people what they should do, whether that's whole society or even this–you could apply this to, say, a company–how you thought about knowledge in the organization. You could have, you know, strategic planners sitting in some corporate office deciding exactly what should be done in all its specifics.

The dynamist notion is that knowledge is like a spreading elm tree, that there is a shared amount of knowledge, but that most knowledge in society and most knowledge in the world is dispersed. That we know many things we can't articulate that are very hard for me to explain. It's very hard for me to explain what is a good Reason magazine article. I can, sort of, get part way there but it's hard to do.

And we also specialize and we reap the benefits of other people's knowledge through complex webs of social and economic interaction. Well, what this means in terms of rules is that the kind of rules you have underlying society should not be ones that try to dictate, in detail, what sort of decisions people should make. Rather they should be ones that allow people to look at the facts around them, and make what they see as the best choice under the circumstances.

Brian: So what would you think of the V-chip?

Virginia: Well, I have–I talk about the V-chip in the book as an example of the difficulty of articulating knowledge. There's this notion that you can have one set of ratings. And that–first of all they should be required by Congress. But also that one set of ratings can capture whatever a parent might be interested in. I mean, you know, I think one thing–interesting contrast is the Internet filters and services that have

evolved without a mandate. And those filters offer many different kinds of choices to parents.

And what happened with–I tell a story in the book about this notion of ratings. When they were debating TV violence in Congress and–everybody, whether in Congress or commenting on it, always used the same example. They always said, ‘Well, the problem is you wouldn’t want to ban ”Schindler’s List,” of course. That’s a serious show. We would–but, of course, it has violence, it even has some nudity. You wouldn’t want to ban that–keep that away from children because that’s an important subject matter. And we’re concerned with, you know, ”Terminator 2”,’ or whatever.

Well, the very first show to ever appear on network television with an M rating, which was the rating that if V-chips were in place–the technology hadn’t been developed yet–it would be kept away from children, which includes teen-agers, was ”Schindler’s List.” And so, in fact, this rating system couldn’t capture that sense that people had of the difference between ”Schindler’s List” and some other show. And yet, there was one congressman, Congressmen Coburn from Oklahoma, who denounced NBC–I think it was NBC–or no, it couldn’t be NBC, they don’t do ratings. But whoever showed ”Schindler’s List” for putting it on network television, and saying it should not have been on television because it has all this nudity and violence in it, and it wasn’t appropriate for airing. So–you know, people disagree.

Brian: I’ll go back to another one of your rules in a moment. At Princeton you studied what?

Virginia: I was an English major. I specialized in Renaissance drama. And I talk about the Renaissance some in the book. And I also took a lot of economics.

Brian: When did you go to Southern California, and why?

Virginia: I went to Southern California in 1986, and I went because my husband had a job at UCLA.

Brian: Where’d you meet him?

Virginia: I met him at Princeton when we were freshmen. We live in the same dorm and he actually lived across from another student that I knew from South Carolina.

Brian: Now you lived in Greenville, South Carolina, you lived in Princeton, New Jersey, and in Southern California.

Virginia: Right. Right. In between Princeton and Southern California, I lived in Philadelphia, where I was a reporter for The Wall Street Journal. And then I lived in Boston where I worked for Inc. magazine.

Brian: How long were you at The Wall Street Journal?

Virginia: Two years.

Brian: Does the world look different to you out there living in Los Angeles than it did in the East Coast community?

Virginia: Well, it’s hard to compare because I’ve lived in Los Angeles so long. So in many ways the world looks different because the world just is different. It would look different even if you were on the East Coast. But I think–yes, there is a different sense of openness. Now when I was at Inc., living in Boston, it was the PC revolution

and we were covering it. And then it was the shake-out in the PC revolution. And, you know, and I think–so we were very tied into that whole community.

But in Southern California, or in California in general, there is a sense of the future being present. I don't know how to describe that. I mean, you're in very cosmopolitan places with people from all over the world who have come there believing in the possibility of a better future for themselves and their children. So that's part of it. Part of it is that you are looking toward the Pacific rather than across the Atlantic, which has a sense of–I mean, you're not looking back toward the old country. It's a strange kind of effect that that has.

And, of course, then there's all the industries that we associate with the future evolution of the economy, which obviously you've got the high-tech Silicon Valley area, and then biotechnology which is also strong in both Northern and Southern California. But I would also argue things like entertainment and design and some of these types of industries that are oriented toward beauty and aesthetics, as well as sort of entertainment are part of the future evolution of the economy.

Brian: Who owns the magazine?

Virginia: Reason is published by an organization called the Reason Foundation, which is 501(c)3 tax exempt organization that actually came after the magazine. The magazine was 10 years as an amateur effort, and then the–in 1978, some of the people who were involved with it–particularly Bob Poole, who's the president of Reason Foundation, decided to start this foundation which would publish the magazine, and would also research the–at that time the very radical notion of privatization, which he had done some work in as a consultant in a consulting firm.

Brian: Does it make money?

Virginia: No, it does not.

Brian: How big is its circulation?

Virginia: About–between 50,000 and 55,000.

Brian: And the people that are behind it, are they names that we know, are they political names? Like who's Charles Paul Freund?

Virginia: Charles Paul Freund is a–he's a writer here in Washington–writer and editor. He worked for–he actually edited at The Washington Post, my first article on stasis vs. dynamism. He worked for the Post outlook section for a number of years. He used to write–people who read The New Republic may remember him from writing The Zeitgeist Checklist. He used to do that, but...

Brian: How about Nick Gillespie?

Virginia: Nick Gillespie is an English PhD who lives in Oxford, Ohio, where his wife is–who's also an English PhD, is a professor at Miami University. And he is, you know, a bright, young journalist who's a–I mean he has his PhD, but he's pursued a journalistic career. And he has been at Reason for about four years, five years.

Brian: Your other senior editor is Jacob Sullum?

Virginia: Jacob Sullum lives in New York. We're a very virtual organization. He is a journalist by background. He worked for newspapers before coming to Reason.

And has been, actually, with us since I became editor in 1989, with a brief detour to National Review and to write a book called "For Your Own Good," which is about the anti-tobacco movement. And he's also a syndicated columnist.

Brian: And who's Bob Poole?

Virginia: Bob Poole is the president of Reason Foundation. He is an MIT-trained engineer who is known in the privatization world as one of the godfathers of that notion. He actually coined the term–adapting the term from Peter Drucker. And he does a lot of research in transportation and infrastructure issues these days, working on ideas of privatizing roads and airports, all that sort of thing.

Brian: I'll ask you some more about people involved in Reason, but we have to go back to Rule number two for a dynamist. By the way, who's your favorite statist?

Virginia: My favorite statist–favorite in...

Brian: Just give us an example of somebody that is a well-known statist.

Virginia: Well, what I like the best is when you see these cross–people who are statists who are agreeing with each other that they wouldn't expect. And the story that I tell in the book is about Pat Buchanan and Jeremy Rifkin on "Crossfire." And Pat Buchanan was being the host on the right that day, and Jeremy Rifkin, who's this anti-technology activist, is–was the guest on the left, and yet they spent the whole time agreeing with each other that this dynamic economy that we have is very dangerous, and that we need to do something about it.

So I enjoy finding those kinds of political alliances –so—I don't know that I have a favorite statist. There are some people who are good at articulating certain kinds of ideas, intellectual writers.

Brian: What's Bill Clinton?

Virginia: Bill Clinton is an interesting mix. He is primarily what I call in the book a technocrat, which is a form of statist that is very prevalent in American politics, has been for at least 100 years. Which is somebody who says 'No, no. I'm for the future.' It's very different from a Jeremy Rifkin or a Pat Buchanan. 'I'm for the future. I like technology. I like, you know, economic progress, whatever. But I have this plan, and the future must conform to my plan.' It's sort of a script. And that is actually assumption that we operate under in a lot of our political discussions, that the future is something to be planned in advance as opposed to evolving.

And I think Bill Clinton's bridge to the 21st century is a good metaphor for that because it was a very effective political slogan, particularly since Bob Dole pledged to build a bridge to the past. And so it made a nice contrast to these young, forward-looking candidates vs. the backward-looking older candidate. But when you think about it, a bridge is a very static structure. It assumes that we're all at point A, and we're all gonna go to point B. And we know exactly where point B is, and we're going to build this bridge by blueprints and sort of centrally plan it. And these kinds of civil engineering metaphors–these very static metaphors, go back to the turn of the century and to that notion of progress.

So I would–I put him in the static camp, but with this caveat. He has a little bit of the dynamic vision in some of his rhetoric, and certainly there have been people who have worked in the administration who have taken those ideas and worked them out.

Brian: What about Newt Gingrich?

Virginia: Gingrich is even more mixed. Newt Gingrich is–I think he has a lot of dynamist instincts in his personality, but they are overwhelmed by his political desires. His goals to shape civilization as a politician. So that—and actually, his PhD dissertation was on technocracy, which is kind of interesting in the Belgian Congo, but he has–he understands more about dynamism than a lot of political figures. And the story I tell in the book about him where he's taken the dynamist side–I tell some others where he's being more technocratic–is about beach volleyball.

Brian: Did–and now when that happened I remember a lot of derision in the press about that. Did people miss that story? What was really going on there?

Virginia: I think people missed that story, and I think he didn't try to explain it, and he didn't have any allies who tried to explain what he did...

Brian: When did this happen?

Virginia: OK. At the 1996 Republican National Convention, which was in San Diego, and was shortly after the Olympic Games, which were in Atlanta, which is were Gingrich is from. It's important to get these geographic context. Before he gave his formal remarks, Newt Gingrich brought onto stage this Olympic beach volleyball player named Kent Steffes, who is–he's a Republican, he's a big Gingrich fan. He'd gone to UCLA, and been in the–economics major, which is kind of known as a sort of market oriented economics department. He's also a C-SPAN fan. And I describe him in the book as "the only C-SPAN devotee ever described by People magazine as brash, bronzed and built like a Greek statue."

So Gingrich pulls him on the stage, and he makes this sort of not terribly articulate encomium to beach volleyball and he says, 'You know, 30 years ago nobody would've envisioned–nobody played beach volleyball, and now people all around the world play and it's in the Olympic Games. And no bureaucrat would have planned it, and that's what freedom is all about.' And everybody went kind of, 'Huh'?

You know, I mean, the crowd cheered because, of course, it was an applause line and they cheered, but they didn't really know why. And the sort of more liberal pundits, to use this to show how wacky Newt was, and they called him weird, was the word that they kept using. And then the conservative pundits were even more horrified. And The Weekly Standard had this headline in its convention edition that said: No more beach volleyball, please.

And what I argue is that, actually, this was a dynamist moment that he–what he said was correct. That this was an example of how things rise–and this is a reasonably good sized industry–beach volleyball, actually–they rise from unexpected places. And no bureaucrat would plan them because who would think of it. No one would design a beach volleyball industry. And that he was right, but it didn't fit in with the political rhetoric. And then I also point out that this vision of play, as a positive good, and

in some kind of–somehow tied to the progress of the market economy, and tied to creativity, is something that is not accepted in intellectual circles, and particularly in conservative circles. And that he was getting in trouble from that, too, and I have a chapter on play.

Brian: Rule number two: Apply to simple generic units and allow them to combine in many different ways.

Virginia: Yeah. Combinations are a real theme in where progress comes from. You know, when you combine things, you can get an enormous number of outcomes. And the way I derived these rules was I looked at all different kinds of dynamic learning systems, and those could be market economies, they could be the scientific process, but they were also things like–there are certain kinds of computer programming techniques that people use where they essentially have the little programs that simulate evolution and they get good outcomes and, you know, what did those have in common? What do adaptable buildings have in common? People writing about all different kinds of evolutionary learning systems–What do they have in common?

And I was struck over and over again by–one of the things is that when you make rules, they're very generic and they don't restrict the kinds of combinations that people can make, whereas when we make different kinds of laws and regulations, we often make very static categories. So you can say, you know, there are homes and there are offices, and home and office never meet, and this is written into many zoning and building codes and permitting codes. So what I'm arguing is that you need to have these–you need to allow many different combinations because people will combine things in unfamiliar and surprising ways.

Brian: Rule number three: Permit credible, understandable, enduring and enforceable commitments.

Virginia: Commitments. Well, rule number two actually gives you the law of contracts–I mean, the idea that you should be able to make different kinds of agreements. And when I talk about rule number two, I emphasize the ability to find like-minded people or–rule number three is the other side of contract, which is commitment. It's not just about combinations. It's about keeping your commitments. And that one of the things you see, for example, in the former Soviet Union and in other places, sort of less-developed economies, is a difficulty in making durable, enforceable commitments. You don't know whether you can trust people, and this limits the number of commitments people are likely to make. So in order to have a good market economy, you need to be able to make deals with strangers. And what you find in places where people can't trust each other, because the legal system doesn't work, is that they will only make deals with family members or people that they've known for a long time, and that works to a point, but it doesn't work to give you an extended order, a really advanced economy.

Brian: By the way, who do you want to read this?

Virginia: Everybody. No. I think people who have an interest in, as it says in the subtitle, creativity, enterprise and progress. If you have any sort of interest–those

words mean something important to you, you ought to take a look at it. And if you have an interest in some of the peculiarities and changing shapes of our political order, you might want to pick it up. And I think also that there are many people who are interested in business and entrepreneurship and technological innovation who would find it very interesting and useful.

Brian: How did you get Tom Peters to say, 'It's the best damn non-fiction I've read in years'?

Virginia: Well, I sent him a copy of the manuscript, and I had done an interview with him for a reason, and I actually quote some parts of it in the book, some of the things he said about various things. And so I had met him, and I knew that his thinking–that he would like the ideas in this book, so I sent it to him, and actually, the full quote was even longer and it said things like, 'My hands literally shook as I read every page and, you know, it was a liberating experience.' But the publisher wanted to keep it, you know, short and to the point, so they used the sort of movie blurb.

Brian: Rule four of five of the dynamist rules that you've–this is all your stuff. You invented all of this.

Virginia: Well, I didn't invent it from whole cloth. I read a lot of other things, but I synthesized it.

Brian: No, but, I mean...

Virginia: Yes. Yes.

Brian: ...these words are your words.

Virginia: Right. That's right.

Brian: How long did it take, by the way, to think all this through?

Virginia: Well, writing the book took about two and a half years, and the rules chapter probably took the longest. It's the longest chapter and it was, in many ways, the most difficult to write.

Brian: Two and a half years of how much work?

Virginia: How much work? That's hard to say. During part of that, my husband was visiting–he was a visiting professor at the Kellogg School at Northwestern University, so he was in Evanston, Illinois, and I was in Southern California, and what I would do is I would go for a week a month to see him and work on the book. And that's–so that would be, you know, roughly a quarter of my time, but that wasn't for the full two and a half years. It was less at the beginning because there's a lot of wheel-spinning when you–especially when you've never written a book before. You don't know how to do it. And so it was–I was working on it somewhat less at the beginning and then more as time went on. I would say probably it was about a fourth of my time.

Brian: And how much would you–talk about your–like these five rules that you've got here, who did you bounce all those off of? A lot of people?

Virginia: Well, the actual rules, when I was writing them, I –it was mainly talking to my husband, although, after I would write a chapter, then I would send it to–I had a few people, including–we talked about Nick Gillespie, my colleague–I had a few friends that I would send the chapters to–each chapter and say, you know, 'Please give me

comment.' Lynn Scarlett, who's the head of the Reason Public Policy Institute, which is the other half of the Reason Foundation, read a lot of it along the way, and so I got this kind of immediate feedback and then I would revise the chapters later on, and then eventually my editor at The Free Press, Paul Gollub, read everything and gave me some good advice.

Brian: Is there a place we can go in Southern California, it says 'Reason' on the door?

Virginia: Yes, there is. We have an office on Sepulveda Boulevard in Los Angeles and–right by the freeway. If you want a traffic report, you can give me a call. And there is a–but we are very–as I mentioned, we do have people all over the country and do a lot. We've used the new technologies–here's an interesting example of combination–we've used these new technologies of the Internet, primarily, but to allow people to make accommodations to their personal lives and keep people on staff if their spouse has a job or needs to go to school in a faraway city, and then...

Brian: How many people do you find there at the Reason offices? And is the Public Policy Institute right there?

Virginia: The Public Policy Institute is also there, although they also have some dispersal. They have one person here in Washington, DC, for example, but most of their dispersed people are in the Southern California area, just living far out and coming in maybe once or twice a week. But–well, there–how many people are actually in our offices, I guess, would be maybe 20, but there are about 35 people working–now that's–there must be about 25 people.

Brian: Rule number four: protect criticism, competition and feedback.

Virginia: Yes. When I walk about progress coming through trial and error, experimentation and feedback, the feedback is a big part of that. And one thing that people sometimes don't get about my book is they think, 'Oh, Virginia's for change. She's just for change. Every change is good.' And that's not at all what I'm saying. I am saying let people try things. That's the competition part. Let them enter, let them try their new ideas, but let other people criticize them. And I talk about two different forms of criticism. One is criticism by expression, which is criticism, it's, you know, 'Well, this movie is lousy,' or, 'This is a terrible product. You know, Consumer Reports tested it and found that it falls apart.' The other is criticism by example, which is competition, which is saying, 'I can do better than those–whoever is existing, and I'm gonna try.' So you need to protect both of those in order to have the learning process that makes progress possible.

Brian: Anybody associated with this organization politically involved with the Republicans or the Democrats?

Virginia: Directly, it–I guess it depends on what you mean by 'associated with.' No one on the Reason magazine staff is. We're very much journalists and not involved at that–in that way. There are people who have been at Reason Foundation. For example, the director of the Public Policy Institute's Privatization Center for many years, Bill Eggers, recently left and ran for the state Assembly in California as a Republican.

And unfortunately, 'cause I think of–highly of him, he lost and he's now gone to work for Governor Bush in Texas and in the–Texas, working on some of those privatization issues. So we have had people like that, but it is not–it is a non-partisan organization. And so if people are involved in politics, they're involved–either if they're gonna run for office, they have to leave their jobs, or they're involved as individuals and...

Brian: Where do you get your money?

Virginia: We get our money primarily from our readers and in–from individuals, and now some of those individuals give us, you know, $25 a year and some of them give us $25,000 a year, but it's–Reason magazine is very fortunate that we have a very diverse funding base. And the advantage of that is it gives you a great–a lot of independence. The disadvantage is if you hear that Joe Smith, who's this fantastic writer, is looking for a job, you don't have Mr. Money Bags that you can go to and say, 'Oh, you know, please give me some money to hire Joe Smith.' And the Reason Foundation, as a whole, also gets money from some foundations and some corporations.

Brian: There's a footnote in the back on page 252 I want to ask you about. It happens to be footnote 52. Actually, I don't know how this is–let me make sure–is that 52 on one chapter?

Virginia: It's one chapter. Yeah.

Brian: Yeah. It's the last chapter in the book. Let me just make sure so that if somebody wanted to find this, Chapter 8, On The Verge.

Virginia: Right.

Brian: Did you get The Verge from Daniel Boorstin?

Virginia: Daniel Boorstin, yeah.

Brian: Oh. But here's the–here's the footnote. 'Hillary Rodham Clinton's speech at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos'–or Davos, I'm not sure how you pronounce it–'Switzerland, February the 2nd, 1998'–so it's not too long ago, about a year ago–'aside from the flaws in Bell's argument'–who's Bell?

Virginia: Bell is Daniel Bell, and basically what Hillary Clinton is doing in that speech is repeating the argument that Daniel Bell made in the "Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism." Bell is a very prominent sociologist. And he was arguing there in that book that over time, capitalism will destroy itself by undermining the puritan ethic that he argues is at the basis of that. And in the chapter on play, which is the preceding chapter, I sort of take issue with that.

Brian: Well, you say here that—and 'Aside from the flaws in Bell's own argument discussed in Chapter 7 and the utter lack of empirical evidence that capitalism is languishing, there is something unseemly about a wealthy and powerful woman and former Wal-Mart director lecturing a selection of the world's wealthiest people on the evils of consumer aspirations. Intellectuals easily accept such ideas because they tend not to count their own pleasures, such as travel, books, art, gourmet food or tax-deductible conferences in Switzerland as consumerist indulgences, and for those motivated primarily by power or fame, of course, consumer products are trivial pleasures.'

Virginia: Right.

Brian: Did you have fun writing that footnote?

Virginia: I guess. Oh, yeah, this is sort of the style I use in a lot of Reason editorials, which is the–I kept under wraps a little bit in the book. But, yes, there is this—I get very angry sometimes when people who are like me–I mean, these people have similar–I'm not–I mean, I like to have nice clothes, I'd like to have a nice house, like anybody else, but it's not my primary motivation. I'm not working to maximize my income. I could be doing things that would make me much richer. But when people who are intellectuals go and they rail about consumerism and it's so terrible, and what they mean is–I mean, what they're really attacking is people's desire to have an easier material life. And they tend to be attacking–often, it's tied up with notions of taste and they're often attacking kind of the–the middle-class notions of taste, and Wal-Mart being a big example. That's why I thought it was particularly ironic that Hillary Clinton, of course, had been on the board of Wal-Mart.

And there is this argument that the desire for better consumer goods undermines over time the virtues on which capitalism depends. And what I argue in Chapter 8 is that, first of all, this is an argument that we have to destroy dynamism in order to save it. The–well, it's gonna destroy itself anyway, so we might as well destroy it now and somehow rein it in. But it's also–it's a misunderstanding of where the problems come from. The problems that–where the system gets blocked up rarely come from people wanting, you know, Nintendo games or something. They come from people try–who work very hard–most of them have a big work ethic–but work to stop competition or to in–get some advantage for their industry or for their interest group, that it's more of a political problem.

Brian: Rule number five, for dynamists, something you invented: 'Establish a framework within which people can create nested, competing frameworks of more specific rules.'

Virginia: Yes. This is the really hard-to-explain one, but it is, in some ways, real–it's something I kept coming up against again and again.

Brian: Let me read it again.

Virginia: Yes.

Brian: OK? "Establish a framework within which people can create nested, competing frameworks of more specific rules."

Virginia: Right. Let me start with an example. You can have a dynamic–dynamist society with all this kind of competition and feedback and variety and innovation. But within that society, let's say you want to run a company that is very consistent. You want to run–you have a McDonald–you want to have McDonald's french fries be the same everywhere. You don't want to encourage people to–your franchisees to have trial and error with the french fries. And so you have within the broader dynamic system, where people are trying new things, you have these more specific rigid rules that are designed to meet some more specific goals and that incorporate your local knowledge, getting back to the rule number one, of what those goals should be. So again and again, I came to this conclusion that nesting of rules is very important, and that within the–

you have simple rules at the sort of social level, at the–the system wide level, but that within those rules, people can have other institutions that have more specific rules and that may be very sort of like these rules.

They may be oriented toward dynamic learning or they may be oriented towards something else, and then those rules can compete with each other, and then we can see, you know, which ones work best or–and it may be that they can co-exist, too, that, you know, McDonald's french fries are good to have consistency, but you also want to have a restaurant with a gourmet chef who makes a different dish every night. And there's no reason that the restaurant industry can't accommodate both of those kinds of models.

Brian: OK. Here's the list of Reason Foundation trustees.

Virginia: OK.

Brian: And I'll read it quickly and then, obviously, go back and ask you about a couple.

Virginia: Right. Right.

Brian: Harry Teasley Jr., the chairman. Well, let me just stop there. Who is he?

Virginia: He is a retired Coca-Cola executive. He was a–he was CEO of a number of their different divisions over his career, and he lives in Tampa, Florida. He has a great sort of dynamist understanding of the world, particularly in–as it relates to resource use and the relationship between business innovation and environmental issues.

Brian: Well, there are three names that pop right out, are well-known in this town. One of them is James Glassman...

Virginia: Yes. Yes.

Brian: ...who is?

Virginia: Jim Glassman is a columnist for The Washington Post. He was the founder of Roll Call. And he was at one time, the publisher of The New Republic. And it's actually–Jim is the most related to the book of the people you might list because he became a trustee because of this book, essentially. When I wrote–a few years after I wrote the 1990 Washington Post article, we had–we opened a Washington office here, and we had a party to celebrate the opening, and Jim came to the party and he was praising this article, 'Oh, you got that right, you know, dynamism vs. stasis. This is really how the world works.' So then when I started writing the book and I was doing research in 1995, I said, 'Well, gee, I'd better go find some of these dynamists, you know. It's like I know some technology people, but I need to find some people who are more–at least involved in politics.'

So I said, 'Well, I'll interview Jim Glassman,' whom I–you know, I knew slightly, but we were by no means friends. So I called him up and I said, 'You know, we're–I want to do this interview,' and we did the interview, and he, at some point–it might've actually been earlier than that he had called me looking for The Post piece and wanting to write a column about the idea. Anyway, we got to be friends on the basis of these ideas, and he has a very good background in magazine publishing. So eventually, I

proposed that he would be a good board member, and the board agreed, and he joined our board.

Brian: C. Boyden Gray.

Virginia: Boyden Gray is a relatively recent addition to Reason's board. He was, as you obviously know, a counsel to President Bush. His brother, Burton Gray, was one of the–it might have been one of the founding board members of Reason, was a board member for many years and died very young, very tragically–had a heart attack. And so the Gray family has been involved with the Reason Foundation over many years and we actually have our–Reason magazine's summer internship is endowed in memory of Burton Gray, and so Boyden has taken an interest in us....

Brian: Walter E. Williams.

Virginia: Walter Williams is a professor at George Mason University and a syndicated columnist, very articulate spokesman for libertarian ideas and has, again, been involved with Reason for many, many years.

Brian: Now Thomas Beach and William Dunn and Neal Goldman, Stina Hans–Is that...

Virginia: Stina Hans.

Brian: Got that one wrong. Manuel–or Manuel...

Virginia: Oh, he actually goes by Manny Klausner, yeah.

Brian: ...Klausner, David Koch or Koch?

Virginia: Koch.

Brian: David Koch.

Virginia: David Koch.

Brian: Missed that one, too. James Lintott, Robert Poole, Al St. Clair, Joel Stern. Any of those folks that you can explain to us and how they get there? I mean, what's the central reason why somebody comes to the Reason Foundation?

Virginia: Well, I think they are excited about the ideas that we believe in and they are–sometimes they've been involved with us on some particular policy issue. Often, they–many of the people whose names you read are people who are essentially magazine readers and are enthusiastic about the magazine, and then came to know about the Public Policy Institute through that and, you know, they believe in what we believe in. And at some point they, you know, want to get more involved.

Brian: One of the names most mentioned in your book is Friedrich von Hayek.

Virginia: Yes.

Brian: Who was he?

Virginia: Friedrich Hayek was, I say, the most important philosopher of dynamism. He was an Austrian-born economist and social philosopher who ventured even into issues of cognitive psychology and other real–really Renaissance man of ideas, who was a great defender and articulate–well, not just a defender but an explorer of what it means to have a market economy and a free society. And many of the ideas in the book about knowledge come from him because he was one of the first people to articulate the notion that what a market does is act as a telecommunications system

for dispersed knowledge. He actually used that analogy, and he was a Nobel laureate. He died in, I believe, '92 or '93. This would be the 100th year of his birth.

Brian: You have a quote in your book, 'Why I am not a conservative,' and I want to read it. "As has often been acknowledged by conservative writers, one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of new–of the new as such, while the liberal position is based on courage and confidence, and on a preparedness to let change run its course, even if we cannot predict what it will lead. Conservatives are inclined to use the powers of government to prevent change or to limit its rate to whatever appeals to the more timid mind. In looking forward, they lack the–they lack the faith and the spontaneous forces of adjustment, which makes the liberal accept changes without apprehension, even though he does not know how the necessary adaptations will be brought about." Could he write that today?

Virginia: Well, he could write it in the context in which he wrote it. As I mentioned, he was Austrian-born. He–after the Nazis came to power, he went to England and he was at the London School of Economics for many years, and eventually, he came to the United States and was at the University of Chicago. But he had very much of a European perspective and the–it–his use of the word 'liberal' is in the classical sense. It is not in the American sense. And so in that sense, I think it is true, and one of the–he struggled in that essay with what to call himself, and he came up with the not-very-catchy identification of Old Whig, but he–'cause he didn't like libertarian because that was too clunky and too much of a neologism, and 'liberal' had this problem of having been confused with sort of various kinds of planning or redistribution notions.

But what I would argue is this sense of open-endedness is very much what I'm getting at with the notion of dynamism, that a society and individuals can venture into the unknown future and make adjustments and be much more resilient than they're often given credit for.

Brian: Would a dynamist then have "Road to Serfdom" on their–a Hayek book?

Virginia: They might. I mean, the one that I particularly will–use in this book is "The Constitution of Liberty," and also–which is–but "Road to Serfdom" was his best-selling book.

Brian: Based on what you said very early, would they have all of Ayn Rand's books up there on the shelf?

Virginia: Not necessarily. Some–I think–many people who are very devoted to Rand's works have been very–they have responded very well to this book because many people like Rand, are drawn to Rand because of her celebration of the creative spirit, and particularly in her fiction and her way of showing how restrictions on market enterprise are just as restrictive of the creative spirit as restrictions on artistic enterprise. That said, Rand's thought is a–her–the other side of her thought –her rationalistic philosophy can take different forms vis-a-vis these ideas. Depending on your personality, you may take it and say, 'Oh, well, I love this open-ended notion,' but it might also be restrictive.

Brian: Is there any candidate that you know running for president of the United States as we speak who you would find would be most–the most interested in a book like this, based on what you know?

Virginia: The most interested, I don't know. I think that there are very few people in elected office who would thoroughly be comfortable with the dynamic vision because our politics is this very technocratic politics. People get elected by saying, you know, 'I will make the future look like this.' And I actually quote in the book someone from Capitol Hill saying a year after the Republicans came in office that what had gone wrong was that, "They're good conservatives, so they want to shrink the size of government, but they think of that as getting as close to the abyss as possible without falling off," and that's very contrary to the dynamic vision, which is–you know, that thing you call the abyss, that's called life. That's called society. That's called the rest of us outside of Washington.

So it's very hard for somebody to survive in that environment. I think there are elements of dynamist thought in any number of candidates, and there are people around people–I mean, I am very hard on Al Gore in this book because I think he is a combination, in many respects, of the technocratic planning impulse with his sort of reactionary stasis notion, but there are certainly people who have worked for Al Gore and who have been around Al Gore who are very dynamist. I quote a guy in there who was a speechwriter for him, Dan Pink, who writes about the free agent economy now, who is very much thoroughly in keeping with these. And similarly, you know, on the Republican side, people have said to me, 'Well, John Kasich would–he would like these ideas,' and sometimes I hear him and I think, yeah, he would. And then other times I hear him and I'm not so sure. Or George W. Bush would like these ideas or Steve Forbes would like these ideas.

Brian: A couple quick personal questions. By the way, how long have you and your husband been married?

Virginia: For 12 years.

Brian: Have you had–do you have children?

Virginia: No.

Brian: And are you ever going to get into politics?

Virginia: No. I think we can pretty safely say that.

Brian: What did you think of this process of writing your first book?

Virginia: It was the most difficult thing I've done and the most fun thing I've done, actually.

Brian: Are you gonna do another one?

Virginia: Undoubtedly. I'm not sure what it'll be on. I have several ideas.

Brian: Here is the book. It's called "The Future and Its Enemies," by Virginia Postrel, who is also the editor of Reason magazine. Thank you very much.

Virginia: Thank you

A critique of his ideas & actions.

Virginia Postrel
The Future and Its Enemies (CSPAN Interview)
Jan 19, 1999

booknotes.org & c-span.org
A window into a pro-tech advocating right-libertarian discussion from the 90s.

www.thetedkarchive.com