

# THE TYRANNY OF DEAD IDEAS: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Thinking to Unleash a New Prosperity

by Matt Miller, Times Books - Henry Holt and Company, 2009

Book Review by Mike Powers and Herb Rubenstein, President, Sustainable Business Group

## *Introduction*

In his book, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, Matt Miller proposes three facts that are poised to shape economic life for a generation:

Global competition and rapid technological change leading to a severe test of America's economy,

The lack of preparation by political and business leaders for what lies ahead,

Inaction due to a set of ideas regarding how a modern economy should function, that pervade the entire economic and political culture.

According to Miller, these "Dead Ideas" which include:

Our children will earn more than we do,

Free trade is "good" no matter how many people it hurts,

Employers should play a central role in the provision of health coverage,

Taxes hurt the economy,

"Local control" of schools is essential,

People tend to end up, in economic terms, where they deserve,

These ideas pose one of the greatest threats to our economic future that we have indeed ever faced. The first half of the book examines each of these ideas, offering insights from history, psychology and economics to explain why they have become imbedded in our modern psyche, and what are the consequences there of.

## *Destined Ideas*

In the second half of the book, Miller introduces a set of "Destined Ideas", ideas that today may seem unorthodox and controversial, but, according to Miller, are in fact certain to reshape business and political life in the near future:

Only government can save business,

Only business can save liberalism,

Only higher taxes can save the economy (and the planet),

Only the (lower) upper class can save us from inequality

Only better living can save sagging paychecks,

Only a dose of "nationalization" can save local schools,

Only lessons from abroad can save American ideals.

Miller stipulates the purpose of the book is not to persuade the reader that these "Destined Ideas" are the course that should be followed. Rather, they are in Miller's view what will come to pass, and will in fact come to prevail as dead ideas give way under the pressure of impending economic and political forces.

### ***Transition***

This assumption however begs the question: who will be at the forefront of the transition? If this transition of dead ideas to destined ideas is indeed imminent, who will lead the charge for developing new ideas; who will start the conversation? According to Miller, the most logical candidates to form the vanguard of this new creed will be America's business leaders.

The coming transition will represent the triumph of pragmatism over ideology. The business sector by instinct and temperament prefers pragmatic results to ideology. The global reach of American enterprise allows executives to be among the first to see threats from abroad. Their cosmopolitan outlook allows them to quickly grasp what can be learned from developments elsewhere. Then there is business ever present need for an educated workforce and a burgeoning middle class of consumers.

### ***Conclusion***

Breaking the tyranny of dead ideas will not be easy. Miller suggests several reasons why business is not currently taking a leadership role in shaping Americas direction, such as the simple lack of time and focus, as well as the lack of tangible incentives. Still, change is coming. The sooner we are able to break free of our prevailing dead ideas, the less disruptive the years ahead will be as well as the less damaging to ourselves and the rest of the world.

### ***About the Authors***

Mike Powers is a consultant to the Sustainable Business Group.

Herb Rubenstein is the President of Sustainable Business Group a consulting firm to businesses. The headquarters of the Sustainable Business Group is Denver, Colorado. He is co-author of Breakthrough, Inc. - High Growth Strategies for Entrepreneurial Organizations (Prentice Hall/Financial Times, 1999). He also serves as an Adjunct Professor of Strategic Planning George Washington University, and has been an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurism at George Mason University and Colorado State University. He has his law degree from Georgetown University, his Master of Public Affairs from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, a graduate degree in sociology from the University of Bristol in Bristol, England and was a Phi Beta Kappa/Omicron Delta Kappa graduate from Washington and Lee University in 1974. His email address is herb@sbizgroup.com and he can be reached at 303 910-7961.