The View From Yesterday

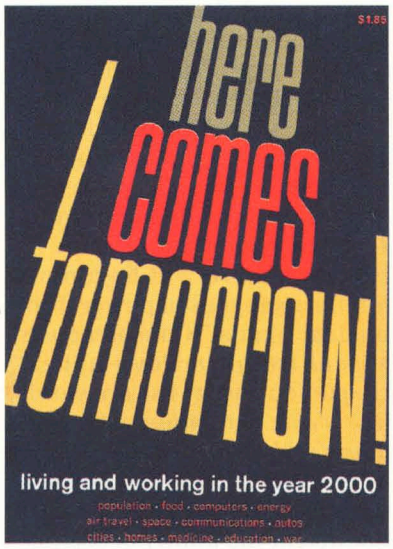
By Matthew Budman

As an adolescent, my reading tastes ran more to sci-fi than management and strategy, and my speculations about the year 2000 resembled something out of *The Jetsons*. It's comforting, I suppose, to discover that I was far from alone, and that many of those who foresaw populated moonbases and cruise-around-town jetpacks didn't have the excuse of youth.

In 1967, a team of *Wall Street Journal* writers put together a series of articles and published them as *Here Comes Tomorrow!: Living and Working in the Year 2000* (Dow Jones). The book remains a bright snapshot of the world that corporations and business thinkers envisioned we'd be living in today.

As you'd expect, some predictions were ludicrously off the mark, others eerily prescient. Pretty consistently, the silliest and most colorful predictions came from the companies trying to bring this new world into existence by virtue of products: "Keeping house will be a breeze by the year 2000," wrote Herbert G. Lawson, citing Ford Motor Co. predictions. "Sonic cleaning devices and air-filtering systems will banish dirt and just about eliminate dusting, scrubbing and vacuuming. . . . Dishwashing will be a thing of the past, since disposable dishes will be made from powdered plastic for each meal by a machine in the kitchen. Permanent-press clothes will do away with ironing."

These changes "will greatly expand the housewife's leisure time," Lawson wrote. "And the home will be equipped with electronic marvels that will enable her to put her new freedom to good use. Her morning coffee klatch, for example, could forsake gossip to watch a video tape of *King Lear* rented from the local library."



King Lear? Didn't *General Hospital* begin in 1963? And anyway, most of the time the housewife used her "new freedom" to get a job.

Lawson's passage, incidentally, was one of only a handful in the book that acknowledged that women would be around in 2000; throughout, the writers made quaint references to "computer men" and "middle-management men" and "men on Mars"—a year after the founding of the National Organization of Women! In avoiding taking on social trends—which, in all fairness, are difficult to predict—the authors missed not only women's liberation itself, but all of its implications.

In 1967, computers were expected to take on a progressively larger role in our lives, but few anticipated the scale on which the shift would occur. Radio Corporation of America predicted that by century's end, "there will be 220,000 computers in the United States." There might be that many just on commuters' laps on this morning's 7:27 train into Manhattan.

The *Journal*'s Stanley Penn foresaw not PCs on every desktop but mainframe-based systems, and raved about their potential for broad information dissemination. Computers, he wrote, "will increase factory and office productivity. . . . They will store vast amounts of information about law, medicine, science and other fields, with instant access to any bit of needed data available to thousands of widely scattered persons via teletypewriter links. . . . [T]hey will permit lightning solution of scientific and technical problems that for all practical purposes would be insoluble otherwise. . . . in the works are machines that could even follow spoken instructions."

Today, none of this seems the least bit exaggerated—and neither does the danger of the "[i]mpersonalization caused by computers," which received a remarkably sensitive reading here: "The sort of frustrations already encountered by a customer who feels he has been incorrectly billed by a store with computerized bookkeeping could become commonplace in other areas of life." And fearing that the future would be more *1984* than 2000, Penn warned of privacy issues stemming from nationwide "data storehouses" and called for "legal curbs" on the ways computers can be used.

He went on to predict that "by the late 1970s a new system of credit based on computer networks will have started replacing cash and checks," going on to describe—with almost total accuracy—debit cards, direct paycheck deposit, credit cards, and electronic bill-paying services.

Penn predicted that in the workplace, too, computers would

have a tremendous impact. The book's vision of managers' information-age roles became the standard: "Many of the decisions that middle-management men now make," Penn wrote, "will be made almost automatically by a computer; for example, if a manufacturer's inventory of finished goods declines to a specified level, a computer will print out a production order." But this wouldn't necessarily mean the extinction of the hands-on manager—Penn quoted a professor as saying, "In the future, the middle manager will handle more creative tasks."

Exactly right—except that in their minds, the creativity would take a lot less time than routine decision-making had: A government-sponsored study foresaw the "highly productive" employee of 2000 with an average workweek of 31 hours, "a week that his 1966 counterpart would envy." Indeed, writer after writer in *Here Comes Tomorrow!* speculated about what we would do for leisure after computers cut our workweek in half. Not one accurately gauged our appetite and capacity for mindless, passive entertainment: "A single cable might supply a home with as many as 10 commercial and educational television channels," wrote Jerry E. Bishop, who today probably spends Sundays clicking between ESPN2 and the Golf Channel.

Bishop's chapter on the future of communications envisioned a system of networked offices and homes, and he foresaw satellite-driven communications and the use of faxes. How would we power all these electronics? Through "awesomely efficient" nuclear power plants that "will be essential to fill the greatly increased power demands expected by the end of the century." Ultimately, wrote *Journal* reporter William D. Hartley, "there will be almost limitless supplies of power from nuclear plants." Conspicuously absent from Hartley's upbeat chapter on energy use are words like *waste* and *fallout* and *meltdown* and *China syndrome*.

Indeed, throughout the book writers exhibit a near-total confidence in the ability of science to eradicate problems. It would help save us from the ravages wrought by gas-powered autos—by 1975, a Westinghouse specialist predicted, there'd be 100,000 battery-powered vehicles on U.S. roads. But things would still be crowded on the ground, according to a guy from GM who forecast: "The first floor of future homes will be turned over to cars. That's right—five-car garages." Considering that *Here Comes Tomorrow!* also predicted that the U.S. population would leap to "close to 340 million," that's an awful lot of cars.

Published the same year that race riots wracked America's big cities and during a period when manufacturing deserted those cities, *Here Comes Tomorrow!* didn't envision the rise of edge cities and the emptying of the cities themselves. Mitchell Gordon predicted the introduction of "vertical cities within the city," with buildings reaching "heights of 200 or more stories . . . . In theory, residents would hardly ever have to step outside."

The assumption that most of us would be living and working in the center of town—as well as the failure to take then-current economic and social patterns into account—led other predictions astray as well. "In the core areas of cities, slums will largely disappear," Gordon wrote optimistically. "Racial tensions also will decline sharply." He advocated the gentrification of city centers: Sure, it'd break up "close-knit neighborhoods," but since "many of these are Negro ghettos" and the residents could be dispersed "into formerly all-white neighborhoods," no problem!

To the writers' credit, no one foresaw a world of total harmony and peace—in the cities or abroad. Appropriately for the era of Vietnam and the Cold War, Frederick Taylor's grave last chapter took on the subject of war—mostly the machinery. It added a somber note to what was otherwise a hopeful vision of the year 2000.

That vision definitely gives us something to shoot for. ■

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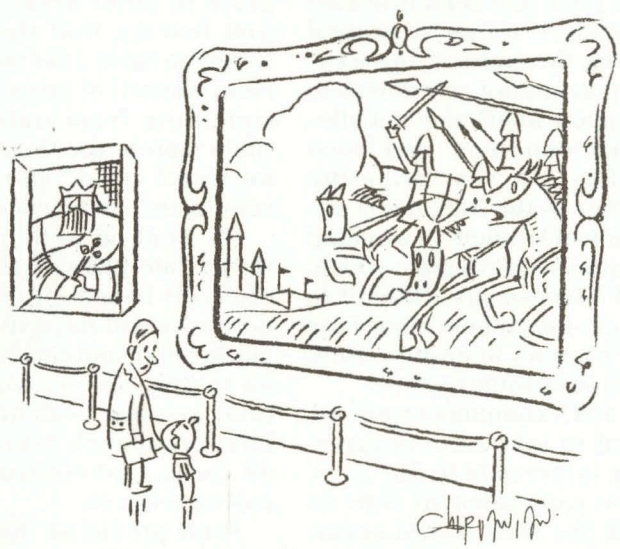
Laughing Matters



"It's a painting. There is no sound."