# Future

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# Introduction

*Every present is great with the future.*

—Gottfried Leibniz, 1703

Buckle your Buck Rogers seat belt to take a journey through time. Although any time is a good time to look back on the future, the first decade of a new century and millennium is an especially apt moment to reflect on how visionaries of the last 100 years or so saw tomorrow playing out. The history of the future is as important and revealing as our "standard" history—the history of the past—but is undervalued and relatively little known, the reason why this book was written and why it might be worth spending a bit of your own future with. "In the recorded history of man," wrote Anne Fremantle in 1955, "it may well be that the visions of the future, of other worlds, of the shape of things to come, have played as great a part as the remembrance of things past," the remembrance of things future being the story of this book.[1]

Besides the obvious but largely overlooked need for a full telling of how visionaries imagined the recent history of the future, particularly that of America, there is considerable need for additional context by which to locate today's vision of tomorrow with those of yesterday. A look back on how people looked forward reveals that while it possesses certain common themes—technological progress, scientific breakthroughs, and a utopian (or dystopian) perspective, among them—the future is not a fixed idea but a highly variable one that reflects the values of those who are imagining it. There is, I argue, not one narrative of the future in America since the end of World War I but rather six, each one strongly tied to the cultural dynamics of its time. It also becomes clear how the idea of the future, largely limited to "experts" in the early decades of the twentieth century, grew in both volume and importance as it rode the technological wave into the new millennium. For better or worse, we're all futurists now, the need for each of us to anticipate tomorrow part and parcel of everyday life.

It should hardly come as news that the future, that is, that which is yet

to be, has always been viewed as a highly charged cultural site loaded with significance and meaning. The future, David Remnick explained in 1997, consists of "stories we tell to amaze ourselves, to give hope to the desperate, to jolt the complacent," implying that thinking about tomorrow really serves the needs of today. The future is indeed "always about the present," Remnick continued, a catharsis for "what confuses us, what we desire, what we fear."[2] Likewise, "prophecies and predictions tell us little or nothing about what will happen," David A. Wilson argued in his *History of the Future*, but rather "tell us a great deal about the fears, hopes, desires, and circumstances of the people who peer into their own future and imagine what it will be like."[3]

More than this, however, futurism (the practice dedicated to anticipating the future) is often propagandist, a cause attached to whatever, whenever, and however is being predicted. Just as history is "written by the winners," as the popular phrase goes, official versions of the future also carry an agenda and, at times, serve as a kind of political act. With many (actually an infinite number of) futures to choose from, prediction is thus typically not a random exercise but more often an attempt to turn a particular scenario into reality. And while symbiotically connected and codependent, the future and futurism can of course be going separate directions, the two concepts in fact often sharing an inverse relationship. Positive views of the future do not imply a positive state of futurism, in other words, the latter enjoying some of its best days during the darkest days of the former. Concern and fears about the future not surprisingly spark a greater demand for futurism, thus accounting for the field's popularity during the economically depressed 1930s, the paranoid 1950s, and the self-loathing 1970s.

It is the pure unknowability of the future, however, that has made it such a powerful force in our imaginations and daily lives. "The future: have any two words excited more hope, prompted more dreams and visions?" asked William A. Henry III in 1992, the limitless possibilities of tomorrow at the core of the visceral response those two words elicit.[4] Our pervasive interest in the future—whether it's reading one's horoscope, watching the weather forecast, betting on a ballgame, subscribing to Bloomberg to get the inside scoop on what the stock market might or might not do, or feeling the world might end in 2012—reflects our common desire to know the unknowable in order to anticipate it or, even better, control it. "The itch to know what's going to happen next seems engrained in modern man," Thomas Griffith observed in 1979, all of us competing with one another in what could be viewed as a marketplace of potential futures.[5] The survival of any species is in fact a kind of leap of faith in tomorrow, the idea of the future firmly entrenched in the

act of creation. "Every garden and child is an expressed belief in the future," Stefan Kanfer wrote in 1976, the origins of life itself grounded in a commitment to the yet-to-be.[6]

While "to be human is to ponder the future," as David Rejeski and Robert L. Olson succinctly put it in 2006, actually knowing what's to come is of course impossible.[7] Like Philadelphia for W. C. Fields, there's no "there" there when it comes to the future, a new horizon always appearing as soon as you reach the last one. It is, though, this inherent elusive and ephemeral quality of futurism that makes it so compelling, not unlike the thought of peering into Pandora's box to see what forbidden goodies might be inside. "It [the future] is more creative, more beautiful and strange than can be imagined by the past," Lewis Lapham mused in 1979, seconded by James Poniewozik's view almost a quarter-century later that "nothing is more shimmeringly beautiful than the next big thing in our imagination."[8] That major world events have been considerably shaped by factors impossible to predict—insanity, genius, randomness—as Nassim Nicholas Taleb convincingly argued in his 2007 *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, attempting to know the future is only that much more desirable, one of our most powerful fantasies.[9] And, as David Orrell pointed out in his 2006 *The Future of Everything: The Science of Prediction*, recent scientific thinking such as chaos theory and the butterfly effect have made the forecasting method du jour—mathematical modeling—fundamentally unreliable, thus making it impossible to know if the stock market will go up or down or if one should take an umbrella to work.[10]

Besides being an inherently losing proposition, it hasn't helped that more than one charlatan has hung out a futurist shingle, interested only in telling people what they want (or don't want) to hear in order to make a buck. Whether populated by those with alleged special powers—soothsayers, oracles, crystal ball gazers, clairvoyants, palm readers, dream interpreters, stargazers, and the occasional witch—or professional futurists with reams of "data" up their sleeves, the field has always been viewed as a bit shady, some considering the whole enterprise to be plain quackery. "To talk about history, you have to have your facts in order, but, to talk about the future, all you have to do is say you work in research," complained George F. Mechlin in 1983, a typical sentiment among the more skeptical.[11] A dozen years later, David Bouchier griped that "financial advisers, think tanks, opinion polls, market researchers, the Federal Reserve and the CIA all specialize in getting the future completely wrong at enormous cost," while he himself believes that "only mothers really know the future." "But the world pays no atten-

tion to mothers," Bouchier grumbled, "the world wants to hear the bad news from a genuine prophet with a long white beard."[12]

Even some genuine prophets, long white beards notwithstanding, regretted their career choice and felt they might be better off with a "real" job. "How did I ever get into the predicting business?" asked one of the best, Isaac Asimov, at the top of his game in the mid-1960s, convinced that "predicting the future is a hopeless, thankless task, with ridicule to begin with and, all too often, scorn to end with."[13] While he had a legitimate point, Asimov was actually overestimating how much the public (especially Americans) have looked back to see if prognosticators were right or wrong. And although futurists have indeed often been treated as Rodney Dangerfields by critics, they have on occasion received the credit they richly deserve. "We desperately need prophets, even false ones, to help us narrow the infinity of plausible futures down to one or at least to a manageable handful," thought Lev Grossman in 2004, a refreshing take on those treading in tomorrow's waters. "They are our advance scouts, infiltrating the undiscovered country, stealing over the border to bring back priceless reconnaissance maps of the world to come," he continued, an all-too-rare expression of appreciation for futurists.[14]

The ambivalence surrounding futurists and the field itself reflects the fact that its history has been a polarized one, the world of tomorrow often imagined in utopian or dystopian language and imagery. If not a Rousseau-like peaceful kingdom where we all will one day live happily ever after, the future is frequently a place of impending catastrophe or, just as often, one in which the individual will be crushed under the foot of a totalitarian regime. The future has served as an opportunity to both vent our worst fears and air our greatest hopes, the most profound of the latter that we'll live on after our bodies die. The notion of an afterlife—the core of many religions—is futurism in its purest form, tomorrow conceived not as a place made much better by the next great invention or much worse by an alien invasion but as an alternative universe with its own rules. Futurism has always carried with it a sense of mystery, the ability to know the unknown deemed limited to those with special and, sometimes, evil powers. Prophets were, centuries ago, considered divinely anointed in some way, the strange art common to members of certain families who possessed a genetic predisposition for it.[15]

This off-the-beaten-track aspect of futurism can be most readily seen within science fiction, the primary launching pad of twisted tomorrows over the past century. The standard tools of the sci-fi trade have served as some of the most familiar tropes of futurism, these not just an entertaining diver-

sion but a way to safely contain the darkest side of our imagination. Mad scientists, master races, mutation, barbarism, and disembodied heads are just a few scenarios of future-gone-bad, most of these kinds of narratives not much more meaningful than those found in your typical horror movie of the week. The granddaddy of dystopia, however, is the creation of machines more intelligent or powerful than ourselves, this one reflecting our real-life (and, according to some current futurists, justifiable) fear of technology run amok. Not surprisingly, then, the robot or automatic man has been a ubiquitous figure in the recent history of the future, both appealing to our quest for perfection and acknowledging the threat that we may lose the essence of what makes us human.

Likewise, the idea of perfect, mistake-free, and emotionless machinelike beings, often blended with human (and therefore flawed) traits, as in the case of *2001*'s HAL or *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock, has been a recurring theme within both fictional and nonfictional views of tomorrow, this perhaps best illustrating the love-hate relationship we share with technology. The loss of individuality due to rampant mechanization and conformist mass society has frequently served as cause for alarm for the future, the thought of people being turned into automatons the stuff of cold sweats in the middle of the night. Real-life events in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s served only to fuel fears of a universal state akin to Huxley's disturbing and prescient *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's equally prophetic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), prime evidence that futurism thrives best in periods of instability and insecurity. In her 2007 *A Brief History of the Future*, Oona Strathern considered Orwell, Huxley, and H. G. Wells nothing less than the "three witches of futurism," their vision of the twentieth century a long nightmare that one couldn't wake up from.[16]

The elephant in the futuristic room, however, has undoubtedly been our on-again, off-again relationship with science and technology, this queer romance at the very heart of tomorrowism for at least the past 500 years. Since the Renaissance, in fact, science and technology have dominated our visions of tomorrow, our common dream to, as one mid-twentieth-century futurist put it, go where no man has gone before. Flying machines have been, of course, a staple of futurism, this despite the sensible argument within much of the day's scientific community that they would never get off the ground (the internal combustion engine was never really anticipated, even by the genius of the millennium, Leonardo da Vinci). Time machines also have been commonplace in narratives of the future, these too believed by most to defy the laws of the physical universe (until relatively recently, when

travel through time, at least backward, is considered possible, according to some string theorists).[17]

Overall, however, the actual pace of technology has almost always surpassed that expected by those peering into the future, the quantum leaps made possible by a new discovery impossible to anticipate. In his 1898 *The Sleeper Awakes*, for example, H. G. Wells nailed a number of technologies that were to be—radio, movies, air-conditioning—but underestimated how quickly they would appear—about forty years instead of his projected 200.[18] Wells, whom British "alternate history" novelist Harry Harrison credits with having created almost all themes of science fiction in his own "scientific romances," was off by almost a century when it came to man's landing on the moon, analogous perhaps to how futurists of the twentieth century missed the rapid evolution of information technology by a country mile.[19] Even more than overshooting technological achievements, however, it has been futurists' failure to anticipate major social change, most egregiously the women's and civil rights movements of the twentieth century, that has most seriously and justifiably damaged the reputation of the field. The bias toward predicting technological versus social progress has been and continues to be the Achilles' heel of futurism, the next wave of gadgets and gizmos easier to see coming than a cultural tsunami. It is, as Arnold Toynbee has pointed out, ideas, not technology, that have stirred the biggest changes in history, something that more futurists could and should have taken to heart.

*Future* focuses on the United States from 1920 to today, a way to contain a vast subject that is inherently global (cosmic, actually) and spans millennia. Another reason why this book is so American-centric is that the idea of the future is so American-centric. Since the nation's founding, the notion that tomorrow will be better than today has been a principal strand in America's DNA, our "future-mindedness" rooted in our enduring faith in progress, self-improvement, and limitlessness. The social critic David Brooks considered future-mindedness "a distinctly American trait," an essential and unique part of our national character. Future-mindedness is, Brooks wrote in 2002, "the ability to see the present from the vantage point of the future," as well as "the freedom to feel unencumbered by the past and more emotionally attached to things to come," each of these things making us fundamentally different than every other civilization that has existed on earth.[20]

Brooks was of course hardly the first to notice this streak of tomorrowism that ran through the United States and its people. In fact, futurism was embedded within the nation's very birth, the founding fathers eager to toss

out the historical baggage of the Old World like it was a rotten tomato. "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past," Thomas Jefferson wrote as the American experiment unfolded, the New World a tabula rasa on which to write something original and, in short, better. Other great minds of the last couple of centuries noticed that America and the future were kissing cousins. "America is . . . the land of the future," wrote Hegel two centuries ago, the German philosopher thinking that "the American lives even more for his goals, for the future, than the European." Albert Einstein (who happened to be fascinated by psychics) also saw Americans as somehow different than other people around the world. "Life for him is always becoming, never being," the genius wrote, detecting the classic American faith in the limitless possibilities of the future.[21]

Americans' preference for the future over the past remained strong throughout the twentieth century and still shows no signs of easing up. Hugh Stevenson Tigner felt in 1942, for example, that "It has been a notable characteristic of American life during the last fifty years that the definition of an inconvenience has called forth an invention—another gadget, a new medicine, an improved model, an extra cushion, a change in the rules, a new bridge, one more personal service on trains and ships."[22] Kanfer felt similarly, suggesting a few decades later that "The profound belief in posterity seems uniquely American," the primary reason for this being that the United States had "no yesterday of its own."[23] Even in this postmodern, post-9/11, seemingly post-everything day, social critics remain moved by Americans' optimism rooted in the nation's utopian principles. "If there's a common faith in America, it's our faith in the future," the editors of *Wilson's Quarterly* observed in 2006, convinced that "we can't shake a deep-seated conviction that we'll be able to deal with any problem."[24]

While no other society has embraced futurism as the United States has, prognostication can be traced back thousands of years. The text of the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of prophecy, is essentially a master collection of predictions, employing a set of symbols to create order out of chance events. In ancient Greece, the Delphic oracle provided guidance and was consulted before all major undertakings, and in Greek mythology, Cassandra was granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo (all for naught when she did not return his love). Ancient Romans preferred watching the flight of birds before making major decisions like whom to conquer next, while the early Egyptians preferred stargazing for such matters. Astrology, the system of celestial omens, goes back as far as ancient Babylonia (as does weather forecasting, a favorite hobby of Aristotle's as well), the heavens believed to

wield control over man's destinies. It being common knowledge that one's fate was determined by the relative position of heavenly bodies at the precise moment of birth, having an astrologer as a key adviser was de rigueur for kings, emperors, and even popes for thousands of years, and these seers were consulted on everything from military matters to whether the coming years would be ones of plenty or lean.

For Jews and Christians alike over the centuries, futurism arrived in literally biblical proportions. Prophets, of course, notably Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Daniel, made the futuristic rounds in the Old Testament, knowing what was to come because they heard it firsthand from God. Both the Old and the New Testament make a number of references to the need to anticipate the future ("Without vision, the people perish," says Proverbs 29:18), with the Gospels, we all know, promising a place for the saved in a New Jerusalem. Many Europeans believed the Day of Judgment promised in the Book of Revelation would occur in the year 1000, the Second Coming probably both the most anticipated and the most feared prediction in Western civilization. As the millennium approached, any notable event in the natural world—shooting stars, failed crops, deformed livestock—was viewed as an ominous warning that one had better repent pronto if one was planning on salvation. "In 999, Europe was awash with mystic pilgrims preparing for the end and collapsing in despair at every thunderclap," noted Peter Andrews, something that would happen much the same way in a thousand years, when Armageddon would arrive in digital form when our computers failed.[25] Such was the concept of the future in agriculture-based, preindustrial times, general scholarship agrees, with tomorrow rooted in spirituality and folklore and marked by intuition and faith.

Things began to change in a big way midway between the first and second millennia. Although Mother Shipton, a sixteenth-century English soothsayer (who some experts now believe was a purely fictional character), gained considerable fame making a number of predictions that supposedly turned out to be accurate (all of them seemingly tragic, such as London's Great Plague and Great Fire), it was the infusion of science that redefined futurism. Borrowing from Plato and others and newly equipped with the printing press, English writers such as Thomas More shifted the concept of utopia ("nowhere" in Greek) from a mythical place to a future time, a key turning point within the realm of the imagination. Beginning with the best-known, most over-interpreted, and probably most overrated futurist in history, Nostradamus, the art of prediction increasingly strove to become more of a science. (Because his writings were, more than anything else, cryptic,

David A. Wilson considered the sixteenth-century physician and astrologer "the perfect prophet.")[26] Physicists imbued tomorrow with their quest for reliability and validity—literal "predictability"—the scientific method and new obsession with "proof" significantly weakening folklorist methods of futurism. Copernicus's discovery in the 1500s that Earth revolved around the sun, rather than vice versa, also pushed futurism decidedly toward left-brain thinking (and, as a sidebar, made many astrologers rather suddenly decide to call themselves astronomers). With futurism elevated to the realm of science, the predictive arts of the past—reading palms, tarot cards, or tea leaves—lost much of their credibility, and were left for those on the cultural fringe to claim as their own.

Equally important, the ideals of the Enlightenment—logic, reason, order—were applied to the future of Man, the dream that one day people might be as perfect as the increasing number of instruments and machines being invented. "With the coming of the machine, which enabled man to telescope time in unimagined ways, the tempo of change rose in a wholly unprecedented and explosive manner," wrote Roderick Seidenberg in 1955. Seidenberg believed that with mechanization, Europeans in the seventeenth century started to change their orientation to the past toward one looking to the future, this decisive shift "symboliz[ing] a new relationship in respect to nature, to himself, and to his destiny."[27] With the rise of science and technology, the idea that it was humans, not God, who determined the future gained traction, a giant leap in cosmology and its relationship to tomorrowism. Society would ultimately benefit from industrialization, the scientific revolution, and the rise of financial capitalism, visionaries of the period believed, a natural result of the accumulated knowledge of civilization. "By the eighteenth century the future was increasingly seen in terms of progress," David A. Wilson wrote, "the triumph of technology and reason over nature and passion."[28] The establishment of "universal" time and the mapping of the world too helped create organization out of chaos, each a major achievement that would lead humanity to its ultimate destiny of pure rationalism. The Age of Discovery thus also recast mythologies of space to those of time, changing the very dimensions and parameters of the imagination and leaving the future as the only true realm of the unknown.

Technological developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the steam engine, the factory system, the exploitation of coal and oil, and the phenomenon that was the locomotive, to name just a few—served only to accelerate both the tempo and the possibilities of tomorrow. It was such progress that led to the realization then that "the future would be fundamen-

tally different than the past," as Merrill Sheils put it, the second wave of the Industrial Revolution causing a radical shift in the temporal plates.[29] Major technological change could, for the first time in history, be measured in a single lifetime, this development also recalibrating the workings of futurism. Propelled by nineteenth-century technology, "time itself appeared to be accelerating, and futures—big and small alike—seemed to be coming and going with breathtaking speed," wrote Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding in the introduction to their 2005 collection of essays, *Histories of the Future*, the result an upheaval in the very concept of tomorrow.[30] As well, there was now the possibility, even probability, that machines and processes not yet imagined could, in a half-century or much less, be creating new things not yet imagined, a rather frightening revelation for those used to change occurring at glacial speed. "Nineteenth-century fears and hopes for the technological future crystallise[d] in turn-of-the-century fantasies about the fully mechanized state," wrote editors Alan Sandison and Robert Dingley in the preface to their 2000 *Histories of the Future: Studies in Fact, Fantasy, and Science Fiction*, some of those fantasies coming close to realities within mid-twentieth-century fascist and totalitarian regimes.[31]

Technology wasn't the only thing rocking the boat of tomorrow in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, as intellectuals appropriated the future as a device to speak their minds. Philosophical approaches to futurism emerged as powerful ideological tools (Hegel and Marx come to mind first), and novelists such as Bacon and Swift located their stories in a time yet to be, as a means to satire the political climates of their day. A new form of utopian science fiction also was born in the Victorian era, as Edward Bellamy, H. G. Wells, and Jules Verne brought the future to the masses through their wildly popular novels. Bellamy's *Looking Backward from 2000 to 1887* (which, interestingly, presented Boston circa 2000 as a locus of democratic ideals) was less a prediction than a political treatise using the safe device of fiction, a formula other socialists used to criticize capitalism (and, ironically, sell more books). While Bellamy was disturbed by the unrest within American industry in the 1870s and the out-of-control power of the trusts of the 1880s, Verne and Wells zeroed in on the late-nineteenth-century British class system, the latter's 1895 *The Time Machine* (which jumped forward all the way to the year 802,701) a scathing critique of its vast inequities (and an homage of sorts to Plato's *Republic*, in which biologically superior "guardians" rule over the peasants). Verne too actually didn't try to predict the future, his intent simply (or not so simply) to create imaginative stories based on conditions that then did not exist (a method that would a century

or so later become all the rage in the field when rebranded as "scenario planning.")[32] Those practicing this allegorical style of futurism were sometimes referred to as "mythologists," their stories of tomorrow political wolves in sheep's clothing.

By 1900, it was clear that the future had become part of the public's consciousness but, in many respects, this was only the beginning. As modernity beckoned in the early years of the twentieth century, the concept of the future now had the ideal cultural climate in which to flourish. Henry Adams's turn-of-the-century proposition to create a legitimate science out of the future was a bold one, but it would be the Jules Verne–inspired "Amazing Stories" in popular magazines of the 1920s and 1930s that propelled futurism as a form of entertainment.[33] Equally influential was H. G. Wells, whose stories would serve as the bridge between the romantic sensibilities of Victorian futurism and the colder, crueler versions forged in the Machine Age. Wells's most significant contribution to the field was the realization that the tools of Man had changed but Man had not, posing major trouble ahead in his future as new, much more lethal tools were discovered. With the social consequences of technological change now part of the conversation, dystopian themes now entered the discourse of futurism, with science not only our best ally of tomorrow but also our worst enemy, that is, the ways and means of mass destruction. In his 1933 *The Shape of Things to Come*, for example, Wells located utopia a couple of generations away, after the fall of capitalism, a double whammy in which things would get a lot better only after they got a lot worse. Universalism would ultimately triumph over nationalism and ideology, Wells envisioned, a world state the only political system that could lead to peace and abundance for all. Interestingly, Wells saw intellectual revolutionaries using violence to create this world of peace and love in the 1960s and 1970s, a very rare instance of a futurist accurately predicting major social change or, at least, the idea of it.[34]

It was after the "war to end all wars" when the field took its biggest leap to date, as a distinctively rational brand of futurism continued to blossom. "We emerged from the First World War with a wholly new concept of our possibilities," remembered Charles M. A. Stine in 1942, fully aware that the world and America had irrevocably changed over those few years. "We learned that it was possible not only to emulate nature but even to excel her in certain fields of creation," he continued, acknowledging the dramatic leaps in science made during the war.[35] Importantly, the future could never again be "perfect," the horrors of this war forever making the idea of a coming utopia seem, if not messianic, insincere or naïve. Postwar jitters about a looming

economic depression and/or social revolution also helped propel futurism to a new plane, with quantitative forecasting techniques used for the first time to calm nervous businessmen. The explosion in transportation and communications that followed in the 1920s—the commercialization of the automobile, aviation, radio, telephone, and movies—as well as major advances in both agriculture and industry were a direct result of the new possibilities that the war had seeded. It is right after World War I, then, that our story begins, when it can be said that futurism, as we know it today, was officially born.

Indeed, the twentieth century proved to be a golden era of futurism as economists, sociologists, and political scientists entered the burgeoning field, applying their particular tricks of the trade to advance the rational brand of prediction originally conceived during the Enlightenment. The milestones reached during these hundred years, especially the flying machine and eventual landing on the moon, the development and use of atomic and nuclear weapons, the women's and civil rights movements, the commercialization of the birth control pill, and the advent of biological and genetic engineering, fueled the possibilities of tomorrow in the public's imagination, and helped make the twentieth century the first one to be significantly more about the future than the past. The rise (and temporary collapse) of Wall Street in the 1920s contributed heavily to the popularity of futurism, with the winners and losers separated only by their relative skill in predicting what would go up, what would come down and, most important, when. With the present a difficult one for many, the Depression years also were ripe for thinking about the future, this decade the first in which a concerted effort was made not just to foresee tomorrow but to enable or engineer it (Keynesian economic policies being just one example).

After World War II, a new breed of futurists arrived on the scene, all of them committed to the seemingly noble cause of "planning." Demographers, academics, and other assorted experts and pundits from foundations, government agencies, and think tanks (the Rand Corporation, especially) dwelled in futurisms in order to shape public policy, provide advice to industry, and serve on advisory boards (all of these men in gray flannel suits completely missing the yet-to-be alliance between the USSR and Cuba, not so incidentally). While the between-the-wars era of futurism was grounded firmly in the cultural dynamics of the machine and wartime, tomorrowism looked to the domestic paradise that lay ahead; the future of the postwar years was more fragmented, a function of the new world order. "Faith in a meaningful collective narrative of the future [became] progressively eroded" beginning in the postwar years, Sandison and Dingley argued, with rapidly

expanding globalization and new technologies in particular discouraging a narrow vision of tomorrow.[36]

As with the first world war (wars are essentially battles over opposing visions of the future), however, World War II undoubtedly shifted the foundation of the field, the use of atomic weapons changing the rules of the game of the future. In a nuclear world, thought Kanfer, "the very idea of a future was arguable," as "anti-utopias grew like botulisms in a sealed jar."[37] Indeed, for many thinking outside the box after the war, existential despair was the lingua franca, with Kafkaesque and Orwellian nightmares now part of the vocabulary of tomorrow. Angst would become virtual panic in Alvin Toffler's 1970 *Future Shock*, the bestseller singlehandedly making futurism cool despite the bummer of a message. Change itself now was the problem, Toffler insisted, the pace of society simply too fast for humans to process.

Beginning in earnest in the 1980s, however, the wonkish and depressing future of postwar intellectualism took a sharp (right) turn toward the corporate world, with technology now prime cultural currency. The province of the radical fringe in the late nineteenth century, futurism had become, a century later, a tool of consumer capitalism, as American as mom, apple pie, and Chevrolet. Strategic planners, trend spotters, marketing consultants, and other gurus from disparate backgrounds and with varied experience (myself included) took to the now-lucrative field of advising companies what to do next. Whether methodologies were based on historical inquiry (W. Warren Wagar), studying long-term cycles (Arthur Schlesinger, William Strauss, and Neil Howe), scenario planning (Herman Kahn, Peter Schwartz), computer modeling and simulation (Department of Defense), opinion polling (Elmo Roper, George Gallup), chaos theory (James Gleick), or pure crystal balling (Faith Popcorn, "the Nostradamus of marketing," according to *Fortune*), the essential, decidedly ambitious goal remained the same—to know the unknowable. At the beginning of a new century and millennium, the future of the future is undoubtedly a promising one as it gets increasingly compressed and driven forward by exponential change. "If anything has a future, it's futurism," concluded Stefan Kanfer; tomorrow is as certain as death or taxes as long as we're around to imagine one.[38]

While a number of themes emerged out of my research for this book, especially that of the love-hate relationship between Man and machine, it became clear that the evolution of the idea of the future over the past century or so was the real and biggest story. A chronological approach was thus chosen over a thematic one, as the former provides a stronger narrative and, in short, a

better story. *Future* covers a wide swath, each chapter viewing the idea of the future as it relates to (1) the public or civic arena, i.e., issues relating to government, politics, religion, education, law, geography, nationalism, war, race, ethnicity, class, age, and gender; (2) popular and consumer culture, i.e., the arts, media, communications, lifestyle, recreation/leisure, sports, entertainment, fashion, food, and the home; (3) the economic arena, i.e., business, jobs, and money; (4) travel and transportation, including space; (5) architecture and cities, especially New York; and (6) science and technology, including energy (especially atomic), medicine, weather, the environment, and weapons. Through both a vertical (chronological) and horizontal (thematic) lens, I offer a 360-degree perspective of a recent history of the future; this dualistic approach, I believe, is the best way to take on such a complex subject.

The outline of *Future* follows my argument that there have been six narratives of the future in America since the end of World War I. The first chapter, "The Shape of Things to Come, 1920–1939," explores how America's tomorrow was imagined between the world wars, when leading visionaries foresaw a new age steeped in the rationalism of modernity and, more specifically, the unprecedented power of the machine. The new sights and sounds to be seen and heard in the movies and on the radio were harbingers of, as H. G. Wells famously put it, "the shape of things to come," with the possibilities of future mass communication seemingly endless. Chapter 2, "Great Day Coming, 1940–1945," examines how the future was envisioned during World War II, when America's present was "out of stock," as a popular phrase went, and the future was fully expected to overflow with the bounty of postwar abundance. "Tomorrow" was in fact one of the seminal words and ideas during the war, as Americans sacrificed for, as *Time* expressed it in June 1942, the "great day coming." Chapter 3, "The Best Is Yet to Come, 1946–1964," discusses visions of the future during the postwar years. As fears of another depression ebbed and citizens started to enjoy the fruits of their victory, the future of the American way of life appeared brighter than ever, with science and technology being counted on to make life as easy as that of everyone's favorite future family, the Jetsons.

Chapter 4, "Future Shock, 1965–1979," shows that as America's postwar triumph faded in the mid-1960s, so did much of its faith in a future defined by unlimited progress, a leisure-based society, and urban utopias. In its place, a new future emerged in the late 1960s that reflected the social, economic, and political turmoil of the time, with Toffler's book a poster child for this era's dominant narrative of tomorrow. Chapter 5, "The Empire Strikes Back, 1980–1994," considers how the future played out in the 1980s and early

1990s, when America's confidence was restored under President Reagan's red-white-and-blue leadership. As free-market capitalism flourished and the nation flexed its global muscles as a modern-day empire, much of the doom and gloom of the 1970s evaporated, replaced by the traditional American jeremiad proclaiming our special place as a "city on the hill." The final chapter, "The Matrix, 1995–," deals with how we've imagined the future over the past decade, when the crossing over into a new century and new millennium turbocharged our instincts to look forward. The future was irrevocably altered in the mid-1990s, when it became clear that the Internet was going to be a major force in our lives, shifting many visions of tomorrow from the real world to a virtual one popularly perceived as an all-encompassing online grid. In the book's conclusion, I consider the current state of futurism, and suggest where it should go from here in order to chart a course for future historians of the future.

In terms of sources, the spine of the story relies on how leading visionaries imagined the future as reported in newspapers and magazines, both popular and trade. Literature in the field, both books and journal articles, is used to frame the story and provide valuable context. Primary texts—books, movies, television and radio shows, comics, advertising, etc.—too are used to glean images of what's around the corner. I also use high school and college yearbooks as primary texts, believing them to be an underutilized resource offering special insight into how both youth culture and adult authorities envisioned tomorrow. Finally, *Future* is filled with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of predictions from experts of their day in their own words, my feeling that it's best to hear it direct from the horse's mouth, as the saying goes.

Welcome to a recent history of the future.

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