

# Is America the land of the future?

## A response

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This article aims to provide a response to the various contributions published in a special issue of *foresight* on “Is America the land of the future?”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article is a commentary on the various works in the special issue.

**Findings** – If these essays have gone even part way toward illuminating the underlying problematic of human and cultural development, it will have been worthwhile.

**Originality/value** – Provides a viewpoint on the special issue “Is America the land of the future?”.

**Keywords** United States of America, Forecasting

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Revelations in Perkins’ *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* on how futures methods (including trend analysis, modeling and forecasting) were deliberately employed by US agents to deceive developing countries hit me like the proverbial truck (Perkins, 2004). Among other things it raised the question of how the American futurist community might respond since, from a wider viewpoint, its credibility was clearly at stake. Not long afterwards I came across Kunstler’s *The Long Emergency* (Kunstler, 2005) and Steffan’s *Global Change and the Earth System* (Steffan *et al.*, 2004). The former unflinchingly described a number of looming threats for the US; the latter placed these in the context of human impacts on the entire global system. It was not difficult to join up the dots. Huge concerns were emerging and yet avoidance and denial seemed rampant, especially regarding the actions and policies of the US. Why had responses there had been so muted and what were the implications? This was the catalyst that sparked a new look at the myth of America as “the land of the future”. In place of more conventional upbeat views the US began to seem emblematic of a future that looked like an entropic trap largely of its own making.

Initially the piece was intended as a short column for *Futures* but the scope of the work grew beyond that and was eventually accepted by Colin Blackman, editor of *foresight*. An early draft was circulated to the journal’s editorial board and revised in the light of various comments, some of which were supportive, others not. I understood at the outset that some might be offended by the critique that had emerged – even though much of it originated from non-trivial sources within the US itself. I suppose that is inevitable when shibboleths are questioned and worldview assumptions are tested from within other cultural settings. Yet I wanted to avoid two rather obvious traps: first, any suggestion of “anti-US” sentiment, and second, a “holier than thou” attitude that sought to place the observer “above” the subject. So the essay acknowledged the impossibility of being other than complicit in the dysfunctions it sought to understand. In any event, of the written responses that were received, five appeared in the last issue of *Foresight*, along with the original essay.

This article is a response to the various contributions published in a special issue of *foresight* on “Is America the land of the future?”, an issue stimulated by the author’s essay with the same title.

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## Response to the essays

Most of the responses used the material as a springboard to explore a number of themes. One was solidly in favor of the thesis, adding fresh detail, and one was fully certain that it was misguided, which is pretty much what you would expect. The paper by Richardson and Robinson was distinguished by its complete lack of defensiveness and largely took issue by exploring a variety of progressive institutional changes that they felt offered rather more optimistic future prospects. I really could not disagree with any of their suggestions but I also felt that their account of America's prospects overlooked the evidence of global shifts in natural systems described by Steffan *et al.* (2004). In so doing they may have missed some key aspects of the fundamental predicament facing the US and, by extension, the rest of the world. Burman's piece focused on geopolitical factors and posited two outcomes for the US – one where it balances a new constellation of factors in the world and another where it fails to do this and declines. Again I felt that, while this analysis was useful and constructive in that it explored some of the dimensions I had not covered, and while it agreed that "America has overreached itself", nevertheless the author's preference for "concrete trends" had not sufficiently factored in the very same issues emerging from the earth sciences and their increasingly clear depiction of how humanity (not merely the US) overshot global limits some time ago (Meadows *et al.*, 2005). I would have thought it clear by now that the precipitous decline in the viability of many of the Earth's core life support systems in the air, on land and in the oceans comprehensively undermines business-as-usual assumptions.

The Godet and Gerber piece was brief and summarily dismissive. They seem to be scandalized by the claim that too much reliance has been placed on the ability of markets to achieve sustainable outcomes and, furthermore, that current "success" conceals a deeper longer-term failure. Yet the view I explored was reinforced by a respected Goldman Sachs investment banker who declared that "markets have failed, we now need intelligent governments"[1]. It is also congruent with the conclusions of commentators who argue that for markets to work "properly" they must be compelled to "tell the truth" (about externalities, real costs, future implications etc) (Brown, 2008). From Godet and Gerber's response you would be forgiven for thinking that France was located on a different planet where global dysfunctions that are either caused by, or exacerbated by, widespread market failures have little or no effect. There is clearly a division of views in the field here that merits further clarification.

Morgan's paper supported the thesis, deepened and explored it further. He built on the critique of US futures work and tied it back to embedded themes and deficiencies in US culture that are widely overlooked but, in this view, have powerful effects. He skillfully problematized what is meant by "culture" in the US and argued that corporatization has indeed led to a real and genuine crisis in democracy. For Morgan the way forward for futurists is the determined pursuit of corporate transformation. This is clearly a theme that requires much more attention from the futures community than it has yet received. To the best of my knowledge Perkins' revelations, and the questions they pose, remain unanswered.

Finally there is the long and intriguing piece by Goonatilake, one of the better-informed and most trenchant critics of Western culture and its worldview to be found anywhere. His stock in trade, as it were, is to reframe contemporary phenomena through Buddhist and other non-western epistemologies, thereby highlighting differences, contradictions and possibilities. In the present context he supplies a rich historical perspective and also a corrective to the view that US corporations are the only or most significant players. There are plenty of others around the world who, as other writers here have suggested, must also be taken into account. The current celebration of excess in Dubai, for example, raises major questions about the cultural and corporate agencies responsible for forms of development that appear to go a long way beyond earlier Western models, but in a clearly post-cornucopian age. Is Jumeira Island a design triumph or a hubristic dead end destined to be overcome by rising sea levels?

Goonatilake's most interesting and provocative comments expound a Buddhist view of reality that seeks to resolve world issues by dissolving what it depicts as "the illusion of the self". This obviously goes way beyond the scope of the essay and raises what may be irresolvable conundrums. How, for example, does one account for the further development of, e.g. nanotechnology, which can only exist through the coordinated action of many rational selves, with the relinquishment of selfhood in a post-human future? This is obviously another debate entirely and perhaps the subject of a different issue of the journal. My default position is that Buddhist influences certainly provide a valuable contrast to, and foil for, Western materialism and its various traps. But the view that the former constitutes an alternative worldview that can successfully support an advanced technological civilization (which may or may not include the transhumanist enterprise) does, for me, stand at the outermost extreme of speculative possibility. That may well reflect my own limitations, but there may be value in seeking further commentary on this from others. We certainly need to be a good deal clearer about the implications of "re-making the human" than presently appears to be the case.

### Emerging themes

A number of themes emerge from this review. First, what do all six contributions agree about? All seem to agree that the US – and by extension the rest of the world – faces formidable problems of adaptation to altered circumstances. Though it is not made explicit in all cases no one has argued that the US as it currently operates can anticipate a viable future. The writers differ in their prescriptions of "what should be done" but all seem to agree that what might be called the "current trajectory of development" requires urgent overhaul.

Second, what do they disagree about? To some extent this is, perhaps, more apparent than real for a couple of reasons. The most obvious difference arises from limited space. Each of the writers has picked up themes of their choice and followed them. Also, if we take it as read that "the map upon which we stand defines our world", the differences displayed here are also consequences of what each of the writers actually do and the views of the world that emerge from that knowledge and expertise.

Third, what is missing from the above? As many readers will perhaps know, I take the view that there is a central fallacy in a great deal of futures work, as in other fields. It is based on the notion that the world can be approached as a singular unitary entity that can be adequately known through one or more standard disciplines. As Goonatilake and Morgan have pointed out, FS was founded on notions of rationality and control that emerged in the (western) enlightenment and were later embodied in the industrial revolution and its offspring. No one who is clear about the modern origins of the field (as opposed to its deeper cultural and mythic origins) can ignore the military-industrial-commercial interests at its core. Yet, as currently constituted, such interests are seldom identified even though they clearly point away from any notion of sustainable futures.

The fact is that the dominant tradition of FS draws unevenly on available knowledge and therefore tends to be lop-sided and often superficial. It overlooks other sources of cultural value, other ways of knowing and casts a "shadow of unknowing" over the human and cultural interiors from which awareness and action both proceed. This is not an academic issue. It seems entirely possible that there may be very little time remaining before structural deficiencies of this kind undermine the aspiration of all futurists everywhere to explore a variety of "alternative futures" and to "create futures" according to one or another version of human desire[2].

Currently we are facing the forced compression of these aspirations and dreams into one or another variety of the "overshoot and collapse" scenario. In this context, for futures work to achieve minimum credibility it has, in my view, to consciously draw in some depth on at least four domains encompassing: the inner individual, the outer individual, the inner collective, and the outer collective. I introduced some aspects of this perspective in volume 1 of *Foresight* (Slaughter, 1999). Since then the integral perspective generally, and the integral futures one specifically, have both evolved and borne a variety of fruit, including a journal dedicated to integral studies. (Esbjorn-Hargens and Wilber, 2006) A recent issue of *Futures*

summarized some of the implications for futures methods (Slaughter *et al.*, 2008) and a recent research project applied some of these to an international overview of futures activity (Slaughter *et al.*, 2007).

The perspective is particularly useful when dealing with complex phenomena because it allows us to recognize how different types of knowledge contribute to a more adequate and differentiated map of the world. It is a map that gives due credit to the powerful, but largely invisible, phenomena of the interior domains (the unique inner worlds of people and cultures) and also better conceptualizes the external domains with which we are more familiar and which are thereby often mistakenly held to be the only and “real” world. The interested reader may want to attempt to map each of the contributions discussed here onto these domains and draw their own conclusions. Suffice it to say that each piece, including my own, highlights certain domains and under-represents others. This, therefore, is a new challenge for the field. It is a challenge and an opportunity to expand the scope of our thinking and our vision beyond the limitations of earlier disciplinary paradigms and approaches.

## Conclusion

I mentioned above that questioning “America as the land of the future” could prove challenging for some. Yet the fact that others wrote in support suggest that it is unhelpful to see such work merely as “anti-US” polemic. Rather, it is part of a much larger perspective. At one level the paper can be read as a vote of confidence in the very sources of vitality and deep innovation in US itself and elsewhere that even now suggest ways out of humanity’s immanent decline (Hawken, 2008). Lester Brown, a long-standing observer of the global scene who deserves our respect for pursuing these issues over several decades, cuts directly to the chase. He writes:

There are many things we do not know about the future. But one thing we do know is that business as usual will not continue for much longer. Massive change is inevitable. Will the change come because we move quickly to restructure the economy or because we fail to act and civilization begins to unravel? (Brown, 2008, p. 265).

Clearly the US has failed to use its period of global leadership wisely or apply the benefits of futures thinking and applied foresight. Broadly speaking, it has not acted in ways that would have improved the prospects for the demanding transition to a more just and sustainable world order (Raskin *et al.*, 2002). Instead it has pursued a drastically narrow version of its national interest and the costs of missed opportunities, both to itself and others, are beyond calculation. Frustratingly, the costs of achieving those transitions are much less than those currently wasted on armaments. According to Brown:

Combining social goals and earth restoration components into a Plan B budget yields an additional annual expenditure of \$190 billion, roughly one third of the current US military budget or one sixth of the global military budget (Brown, 2008, pp. 282-283).

Beyond US borders we are witness to a world fraught with unresolved conflicts. Under these conditions I find it difficult to see how the level of international cooperation required to resolve even one global issue – such as reigning in the level of carbon emissions so that global temperatures do not rise above 2 degrees Centigrade – can be achieved in the time available (Lynas, 2008). So, finally, what the essay suggests is that the US is an expression of a deeper problem concerning our species. The latter remains fractured within itself and is insufficiently integrated and clear about who it is and how it could unite to manage a planetary system in deep and continuing crisis. This is the underlying concern that receives so very little overt attention from the futures community.

If these essays have gone even part way toward illuminating the underlying problematic of human and cultural development, it will have been worthwhile. But we should be clear that the writing is on the wall for a reckless, short sighted and growth-at-all-costs civilization still intent on replacing natural processes with fabricated equivalents. What the world desperately needs is new, integrally informed and far-sighted leadership accompanied by a quantum leap in effective and ethically sound grassroots action. The roles that futurists and

foresight practitioners may play in this process remain open but what some have called a “new dark age” is no longer a distant prospect (Berman, 2006).

## Notes

1. Ken Courtis at the Brisbane Future Summit, 2006.
2. With the utmost respect I have to disagree with Inayatullah here. His outline of the “six pillars” of FS, while embracing aspects of the interiors and presenting what some may consider the richest palette of futures tools ever assembled, overlooks a vast amount of empirical evidence by concluding that “we can create the world we wish to live in” (Inayatullah, 2008). That may have been arguable some time ago but, in my view at least, the degree of “human forcing” now observable in many global systems means that such levels of autonomy and choice are no longer available to us.

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