

The Search for Foresight

The World Future Society's First Conference

By Edward Cornish

In this third installment of his memoirs, the Society's founding president tells the inside story of its first conference, held in 1971.

On December 1, 1966, the newly founded World Future Society had exactly three members, but by 1970 our membership had grown to 4,000.

During this time, we upgraded *THE FUTURIST* from a newsletter to an illustrated magazine that won acceptance in the offices and libraries of 30 nations. We also recruited a distinguished Board of Directors. We

established a special service to provide futurists with scholarly papers dealing with the future. And we began shipping books about the future to people around the world.

Our new members worked in many fields and an increasing number of different countries. Some of these futurists focused mainly on problems—how to prevent war, adjust to new technology, deal with high population growth, etc.—but others seemed simply captivated by the technological wonders that made the future just plain fun to think about!

The 1960s were, after all, a decade when the world's economies soared, the media announced amazing new technologies every day, and the good life seemed to be everyone's natural right. The sky itself no longer lim-

PHOTOS: WORLD FUTURE SOCIETY ARCHIVE



Socio-economist Robert Theobald addresses one of the 50 or so sessions at the World Future Society's first conference in 1971.



Glenn T. Seaborg (left), the Nobel Prize–winning discoverer of plutonium and other atomic elements, toured the exhibit hall during the 1971 conference with Society President Edward Cornish (center) acting as his guide. The equipment being demonstrated by Wesley Thomas of Grumman Data Systems (right) has just located and printed an article by Seaborg in the December 1970 issue of *THE FUTURIST*.

ited human aspirations, since space travel had opened up the universe. So, for many people, the future became the substance of their hopes—a dreamland of endless wonders.

Television had begun showing the world to itself in living color, stirring up people's demand for a better life, and by the late Sixties, the baby-boom generation was emerging into young adulthood, bursting with energy, impatiently questioning age-old traditions, and demanding immediate reform of every institution. Minority ethnic groups organized demonstrations to obtain freedom from discrimination, students sought freedom from academic constraints, and women demanded liberation from their traditional roles as housewives and mothers and access to jobs dominated by men. Contributing to the unrest was outrage at U.S. government policies and the Vietnam War, which was killing thousands of young American men.

A few people wanted to break free entirely from the culture in which they had been reared and began creating little utopias, or "experimental communities," seeking to validate a popular slogan of the era: "The future is NOW!"

One experimental community, called Twin Oaks, was based on psychologist B.F. Skinner's utopian novel *Walden Two*, which I had read in college and found intriguing. Skinner was one of the first people to join the World Future Society, and Twin Oaks happened to be located near Louisa, Virginia, within driving distance of my home, so I arranged for my wife, three sons, and myself to spend a weekend living at Twin Oaks.

The communitarians made us welcome, and I was fascinated to hear of the residents' experimentation with new ways to deal with interpersonal relationships, such as having one member—known as the "generalized bastard"—assigned to hear all the complaints

members had about one another and then provide feedback to the offenders. So I provided readers of *THE FUTURIST* with sympathetic articles on Twin Oaks and other social experiments going on at the time. I believed then as well as now that humanity needs to do much more experimenting with new social institutions if we are to deal effectively with the challenges of the future.

The Society itself was a social experiment, and we, too, were reinventing our organization to meet the demands of our members and our changing perceptions of what the Society should be and do.

How Volunteers Built the Society

The Society's lack of money meant that it depended almost entirely on volunteer labor. But our volunteers were no longer limited to the three of us who founded the Society and functioned as its initial officers—Charles W. Williams, Peter Zuckerman, and myself. Many of our new members had begun helping with Society tasks. We also pressed our wives, children, neighbors, colleagues, and friends into performing Society chores.

Our new members bubbled with ideas for programs and activities. Futurists, we found, are all idea-people, and some were willing to do the work required to transform an idea into reality.

Joseph F. Coates, for example, volunteered to start a radio program on the future, and he proved to be an excellent interviewer. The program, called "The Future of—," featured lively discussions with experts in many different fields. The program was broadcast initially over WAMU-FM (American University's station) and distributed by National Public Radio to stations across America.

Major Joseph F. Martino, an Air Force operations officer, proposed a column for *THE FUTURIST* on technological forecasting, and he soon began producing a series of brilliant articles based on his intimate knowledge of military forecasting. The U.S. Air Force had pioneered in technological forecasting since the end of World War II, and Martino knew everything there was to know about what was going on. Later, he wrote *Technological Forecasting for Decision Making* (1972), the classic textbook in this field, and we happily included it in our book service for members.

Hollis Vail, a management consultant with the U.S. Department of the Interior, volunteered to make tape recordings of speeches at Society forums. So we began marketing his tapes to members who could not be at our meetings. Hollis also gave us professional management advice, which I badly needed since I had never before managed anything but myself—and had not done such a good job of that!

Volunteers helped enormously to expand the Society's services to members but did little to reduce the workload on those of us who founded the Society. Our growing membership and expanding services meant that we desperately needed staff people to do things for which we had no suitable volunteers.



Social psychologist Donald Michael, author of *The Unprepared Society* and *The Next Generation*, spoke at a session on “Goals and Values for Mankind.” Standing next to Michael is Joseph Coates, who chaired the session. European futurist Robert Jungk (seated near Michael) and Ian H. Wilson of General Electric also spoke at the session.

So I was always behind in my work—both the work I needed to do to keep my paid job and my volunteer work for the Society. One result was that my home office overflowed with unread manuscripts and unanswered letters. I tried to prioritize my tasks by putting incoming materials in boxes labeled CAN WAIT and URGENT. But the letters and manuscripts assigned to CAN WAIT were quickly buried by additional incoming mail while the URGENT boxes became forbidding towers of paper.

In desperation, I set up a special box for items that were more urgent than urgent, and labeled it URGENTISSIMO. But the URGENTISSIMO box also quickly filled up and overflowed, and months might pass before I got around to dealing with a manuscript or letter.

“You’ve caught a tiger by the tail!” one of my friends informed me, and that expressed exactly how I felt. The Society had developed a forward momentum that was both exciting and terrifying. I couldn’t ride the tiger and I couldn’t let go of it. I just hung on to its tail for dear life!

The Society’s First Conference

In February 1969, two of the Society’s Board members, Charles Williams and Rowan Wakefield, sent out a questionnaire asking members’ thoughts on holding an international meeting, to which we could invite all our members.

The members responded enthusiastically to the questionnaire, but I feared undertaking a conference would be beyond the means of our infant organization. I had failed in my efforts to raise much money for the Society, so we still depended heavily on the meager financial support that I myself could provide, and my savings were rapidly draining away. If the conference failed financially, I feared the Society itself would collapse.

Still, I was impressed by some Society members ad-



Dennis Meadows of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology tells a conference session about the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind. This session brought together scholars trying to find ways to simulate highly complex world conditions, particularly those affecting the quality of human life.

vocating the conference. One was Frank Hopkins, the State Department planning officer who had taken over the arrangements for our luncheon forums in downtown Washington. Hopkins spoke very favorably of John Gerba, a planner for the U.S. Office of Transportation who had volunteered to become general chairman of the conference and lead its organization. I hardly knew Gerba at the time, but I had learned to trust Hopkins’s judgment, and Gerba seemed genuinely dedicated to making the prospective conference really happen. So, despite my fears, I gave the go-ahead for the “First General Assembly of the World Future Society,” to be held in Washington in the spring of 1971.

Gerba went to work with extraordinary energy and enthusiasm. He quickly recruited a planning committee with a wide range of talents, and the committee began laying out an ambitious program that would attract maximum participation by the Society’s members.



Youngsters build an imaginary future city out of Styrofoam during a workshop on urbanization at the Society’s 1971 conference. The children wanted to create a city with open spaces and no pollution, but they discovered to their surprise that they had actually created the urban clutter that city planners have long complained about!



Conference attendees wander through the futuristic village that architect Roy Mason created in the exhibit hall at the Society's first conference.



Blake Cornish, the author's nine-year-old son, tried out an inflatable chair in Roy Mason's futuristic village. Blake spent much of his childhood performing chores for the Society. When he was 19, he helped organize a Society conference and worked as an assistant editor for *THE FUTURIST*. (Today he is a lawyer in Washington, D.C.)

The committee members wanted the conference to reflect their consensus that the future is too important to be left to political leaders. The committee felt, therefore, that the Society needed to pioneer in cross-cultural communications that would enable people in different nations and different walks of life, young and old, male and female, to communicate better with each other and learn to work collegially on world problems.

Striving for maximum inclusiveness, the planning committee arranged 59 formal sessions plus informal sessions that could be set up while the conference was in progress and led by anyone who wanted to discuss a topic. There would also be a "Soap Box" offering open-mike sessions where attendees could take turns addressing the audience on any topic they wanted to discuss.

Due to Gerba and his committee—plus the enthusiasm of our Washington members—an astounding 400 people contributed in various ways to producing our first conference. Some Society members recruited speakers, others distributed conference literature or sought contributions from local Washington businesses. And some members opened their homes to conference attendees who could not afford a hotel room.

Most impressively, Roy Mason, architecture editor of *THE FUTURIST*, rallied his colleagues in the art and architecture worlds to create, in the conference exhibit hall, a unique futuristic village made of inflatable plastic dwellings and furniture.

The planning and preparation for the conference lasted nearly two years, and while it was going on the Society's membership was growing. So the expected attendance at the conference—initially 250—had to be raised to 700. To get additional hotel space, the confer-

ence venue was moved from the Mayflower Hotel to the Washington Hilton, then Washington's largest and most luxurious conference hotel. It was then, as now, much frequented by U.S. presidents, senators, and other top government leaders.

The conference committee contacted almost everybody prominent in the futurist world, and many agreed to come—people like Herman Kahn, co-author of *The Year 2000*; social psychologist Donald Michael; geochemist Harrison Brown of Caltech, who had authored *The Challenge of Man's Future* (1954); IBM's corporate planner William W. Simmons; policy analyst Ian Wilson of General Electric; engineering professor Willis W. Harman of Stanford Research Institute; engineer-author Theodore Gordon; and scores of others.

Science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, whose movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* had become a sensation, told me he didn't want to be listed on the conference program due to a provision in his lecture contract, but he came unannounced and participated actively in the conference, as did fellow science-fiction writer Frederik Pohl.

By the time the conference was over, 1,016 people had registered, making it the biggest meeting of futurists ever held up to that time! Most found it a highly rewarding experience, and, to my great relief, there was a modest surplus of revenues over expenditures.

The *Washington Post* featured our meeting on its front page and provided a colorful description of the people who attended:

They came from France where the futurist movement started, from Israel, from Argentina, from Britain and Germany and Canada, from every corner of the United States, and their diversity, even superficially, was staggering.



Herman Kahn, who developed and popularized the use of scenarios in exploring the future, confers with Lee Schoenecker, co-chairman of the 1971 conference. Kahn attended every Society conference held before his death in 1983.

There were beards, hundreds of them. There were gray retired-colonel crew cuts. There were combed, glossy executive haircuts, and extravagantly proliferating bushes, hair that straggled down over collars, hair bound into head bands, hair that languished on shiny furrowed domes. . . . At the Wednesday opener in the Washington Hilton scores of young people with knapsacks and bedrolls stood in the registration lines next to the button-downs and throat scarves. They mingled, too, right away. They didn't wait for the closing.

Though highly successful, our first conference was not without misadventures. The unexpectedly large attendance meant that many conference sessions were jammed, with the worst crowding occurring during the opening reception. This was especially embarrassing for me because I had persuaded our distinguished Board member Glenn Seaborg, chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, to attend this reception, and when he arrived the crowd was so thick that I found it impossible to get any refreshments for him except for one miserable glass of ginger ale. Happily, Glenn was impressed by the crowd and soon found himself surrounded by admirers.

Another problem occurred when psychologist B.F. Skinner arrived to sign copies of his famous book *Walden Two*. His "Meet the Author" session had been scheduled during the supper hour when the exhibit hall where he was to speak was deserted. I had made a point of being there to greet him, but when I did, there was no one for him to talk to but myself. After locating one other listener, I rushed around the hotel like a town crier shouting that the famed psychologist had arrived. To my relief, a crowd quickly gathered, and Skinner delighted his impromptu audience. Later, several of our members led him away to a party they were having.

Before Skinner left, I had a brief moment to report to him on my visit to the Twin Oaks community, which was based on the psychological principles he advocated. It turned out he had never visited Twin Oaks

himself but took a keen interest in it. Unlike most experimental communities established in the 1960s, Twin Oaks survived into the twenty-first century, and at last report was still going strong. Score one for Skinner's psychological theories!

Putting the Future on the Map

When the conference ended, we could take considerable pride in what the Society's members had accomplished. To begin with, our volunteer conference committee had brought together the largest group of futurists ever assembled, and it had stimulated thousands of people to think seriously about the human future, many probably for the first time.

Highly respected government officials and business executives attended, demonstrating that futurists were no longer being viewed as eccentrics. Thanks to the 50 journalists attending our meeting, articles about the conference appeared in newspapers in San Francisco, Paris, New Delhi, and elsewhere—and the articles were quite friendly and respectful.

The scholarly papers presented at the conference along with very thoughtful oral presentations proved to be so numerous that our staff was overwhelmed, and we could not publish a post-conference report on the proceedings as we had planned, though we did use papers and reports from the conference in *THE FUTURIST* or in other ways. This experience led to our current practice of publishing a volume of papers *before* a conference rather than later. This practice means that a conference volume can be distributed to registrants when they arrive, allowing them to have an immediate reference to the thinking of conference speakers.

The 1971 conference provided the world's first "manpower exchange" for futurists seeking jobs or employers wanting to hire a futurist. At least one futurist actually got a job at our meeting: A General Electric executive hired Ralph Hamil for a job at the corporation's New York headquarters. I had been using Hamil as an assistant editor for *THE FUTURIST*, but we could only pay him for one day a week. Despite my loss of



Psychologist B.F. Skinner (left, foreground) discusses his book *Walden Two* at an impromptu session during the 1971 conference. *Walden Two* envisioned a future society organized on the basis of Skinner's psychological principles.



Harold Linstone, university professor at Portland State University and director of its Futures Research Institute, as well as the editor of the journal *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*.



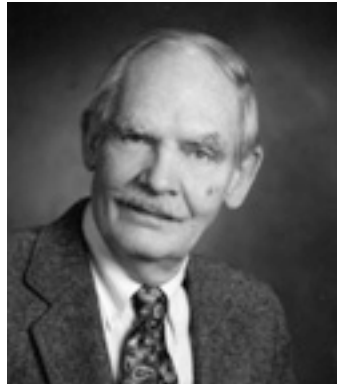
William T. Gay, a retired English professor living in Montgomery, Alabama, organized a session on utopian literature for the 1971 conference. Gay had the distinction of being the first officially enrolled member of the World Future Society.



Psychologist Miriam Kelty, an administrative officer for the National Institute of Mental Health, was an active participant in the Society's Washington chapter as well as the 1971 conference. She specialized in the ethical issues of health research and services.



Gerald Feinberg, a Columbia University physicist, discussed his book *The Prometheus Project: Mankind's Search for Long-Range Goals*. Feinberg was famous for theorizing about *tachyons*, subatomic particles that can travel faster than the speed of light.



Frederik Pohl (shown in a recent photograph) was among the science-fiction writers at the 1971 conference. Another was Arthur C. Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an avid buyer of books to take back to his home in Sri Lanka.



Arnold Brown, vice-president of the Institute of Life Insurance in New York City, reported to the conference on the Institute's pioneering trend-analysis program. Brown later co-founded the Weiner, Brown, Edrich consulting firm in New York City. Today he is Chairman of the World Future Society's Board of Directors.

his services, I was delighted for him to get a full-time job through the Society.

The conference also was probably the first meeting ever held of future-oriented educators. Professors giving courses in futures studies were able to meet, exchange syllabuses, and compare notes during the conference. In addition, political scientists attending the meeting set up an informal information exchange under the leadership of Kenneth W. Hunter of the U.S. General Accounting Office. (Years later, Hunter became the Society's treasurer.)

A Futures Information Consortium was formed as a way to improve the exchange of information about the future. The Consortium's coordinator was Michael Marien of the Educational Policy Research Center at Syracuse University. (In 1979, the World Future Society began publishing Mike's newsletter *Future Survey*—a unique publication of exceptional quality. The Society has proudly published *Future Survey* ever since.)

The success of the Society's first conference greatly encouraged all of us who participated in its creation. The committee succeeded magnificently in enabling people to communicate across the cultural barriers that

separated them. We also achieved a modest international stature, and the study of the future had taken a major step forward. We felt we had at last put the future on the map!

These achievements strengthened my belief that the Society was on the right path—except that we weren't really on any path at all! The Society was a unique institution, and there was no clear path for us to follow. So instead of being path *finders* we had to be path *makers*, and our precarious financial situation meant that each step we took on that path might be our last.

Next: The World Future Society's first conference leads to a rethinking of the organization's future role in world affairs.



About the Author

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The World Future Society at 40: First Impressions

By Lane Jennings

A staff writer and editor recalls the World Future Society's humble atmosphere and grand aspirations.

The World Future Society was born on a back porch in Bethesda, Maryland, just north of Washington, D.C. Its founding staff consisted of journalist Ed Cornish (who had left his full-time job at the National Geographic Society to take this challenge on), his brave wife Sally, their three young sons, and a handful of neighborhood volunteers. By the time I arrived a decade later, the Society had graduated to a "suite" of offices above a beauty parlor several blocks closer to downtown. But the back-porch atmosphere remained. Creative chaos was the norm.

In the 1970s and 1980s, any visitor climbing the drab stairs to the Society's few, dark, unair-conditioned rooms, piled high with boxes, papers, and equipment, saw at once that appearance mattered very little here. WFS devoted every inch of space and every ounce of effort from its staff and volunteers to producing THE FUTURIST magazine, a quarterly series of special-focus newsletters, and a long-term book project to compile a resource directory of individuals, organizations, books, films, and other learning/teaching tools for exploring trends and future social options.

WFS and the Future

The World Future Society might look rough around the edges, I decided, but its heart was in the right place and its priorities were clear—do the work of being a futurist and let others look the part. I began writing book reviews as a volunteer, and, when a paid job opened up, eagerly became a full-time copy editor.

The Society's goal, as we then described it, was to be "an impartial clearinghouse for a variety of different views" on future options. Importantly, the Society declined to ever "take positions on what will or should happen in the future."

I applauded this decision, and still do. It meant that all points of view—reactionary, radical, middle-of-the-road, and just plain wacky—would be welcomed (or at least not turned away without consideration) in WFS publications and meetings. Still I must admit the range of future possibilities being explored seemed far less ominous back then.

Optimists, like F.M. Esfandiari, were confident that worldwide progress in science and technology would quickly produce sweeping social change as material abundance and reasoned dialogue replaced outdated conservative right-wing vs. liberal left-wing worldviews with a unifying "Up-wing" focus on future opportunities for all.

Even pessimists, like Donella Meadows and others who warned of uncontrolled population growth, dwindling stocks of natural resources, and signs of spreading environmental damage, were also proposing policies and actions that might slow or even reverse the alarming trends their statistical models revealed.

Personally, I believed most likely futures fell somewhere between the voices of calm confidence and those of shrill alarm. For example, the Hudson Institute's Herman Kahn seemed right on track. By daring to "think the unthinkable" and seriously explore how a nation might maintain itself even after a massive nuclear attack, he was performing an important futurist task: turning crisis into opportunity, or at least checking even the darkest cloud for its potential silver lining, not just running off to shelter from the storm.

Also, by pointing out the impressive cumulative achievements of humanity over centuries of time (what he called "the long-term multifold trend"), Kahn embodied another important futurist virtue: taking the long view, not demanding, or even promising, quick results.

I remember those early days at the Society as a time of optimism, belief that what futurists were doing mattered, that the world could change itself, and that we could help by stimulating people to begin envisioning their preferred future, then find or invent ways to make that desired future real. Despite minimal conveniences, tight spaces, hectic deadlines, and primitive equipment, somehow the Society kept producing and survived.

The World Future Society now has modern offices and up-to-date equipment. The staff still works long hours in surroundings that are far from elegant, perhaps, but at least professional. Publications and meetings remain at the heart of what we do. In some ways, the organization has not changed all that much in four decades. □

About the Author

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Author Jennings (right) pitches in as a cover model (with wife Margaret) to illustrate an article forecasting global depression. The photograph was taken by another FUTURIST editor, Ellen Dudley.