

The Search for Foresight

Futuring and World Peace

In this fourth installment of his memoirs, the founding president of the World Future Society explains how it contributes to world peace.

By Edward Cornish

Call me a dreamer, but since early 1966 when I was developing a plan for what was to become the World Future Society, I have believed that the Society might someday become an effective force for world peace.

This thought occurred to me suddenly and unexpectedly while I was waiting to cross Seventeenth Street in Washington, D.C., on the way back to my office. I remember the location because the idea caught me by surprise when it burst up from my subconscious.

This eureka moment, which I think of as an epiphany, was based on my sudden realization that an organization focused on the future and providing a neutral forum where people from around the world could share their ideas about the future would provide a new basis for international collaboration and the building of a more peaceful and prosperous future world.

So, in my six-page prospectus for a "Society for the Future," I cautiously suggested that "The study of the future might help the cause of world

peace. . . . Perhaps the 'conquest of the future' may provide what William James called 'a moral equivalent for war.'"

I don't believe I ever discussed this thought with my colleagues on the organizing committee because I felt the idea would distract people from the vision of the proposed Society as a scientific and educational association. It was essential, I felt, that our group not be viewed as a club for starry-eyed dreamers or "peace-mongers."

My model for what was to become the World Future Society had been and remained Britain's Royal Society, which was founded in 1660 by a group of men interested in what was then known as "natural philosophy." People laughed at the Royal Society for doing such crazy things as trying to weigh air, but that small group of enthusiasts and amateurs transformed natural philosophy into what we now know as science.

The Royal Society quickly proved its value. Only a few years after its founding, it began receiving letters

from a humble Dutchman named Anton van Leeuwenhoek, who had begun making microscopes. Leeuwenhoek claimed that he had seen "invisible creatures" by means of the glass lenses that he ground. The Royal Society's members were skeptical, but a few decided to have a look for themselves and, to everyone's astonishment, found that Leeuwenhoek was right: The "invisible creatures"—which we now know as microbes or "germs"—really did exist. This discovery proved to be a milestone in the history of medicine.

The Royal Society demonstrated the power of an *organized group* to accomplish something beyond the power of a single individual. Without the Royal Society, Leeuwenhoek would probably have been dismissed as a crank and his momentous discovery gone unrecognized. Furthermore, Leeuwenhoek demonstrated that a person lacking credentials or money or power can make an extraordinary contribution to human progress. For this reason, I argued strongly that the World Future

John Gerba (standing left), who masterminded the Society's first conference, and President **Edward Cornish** (standing) interrupt vice president **Charles W. Williams's** lunch to discuss an urgent problem (one of many during the meeting). As Williams looks up, German author **Robert Jungk** and **Robert Lamson** of the National Science Foundation remain engrossed in conversation.



PHOTOS: WORLD FUTURE SOCIETY ARCHIVE

Society should have no prerequisites for membership, and the majority of my colleagues on the organizing committee eventually agreed. So, from the beginning, the Society has welcomed as members anyone willing to pay our modest dues.

We also have remained true to our vision of a scientific and educational association that would provide a neutral clearinghouse and forum for our members' views of future possibilities, and we have tried to present conflicting views of what the future actually will be like or *should* be like. Neutrality on political and social issues is critically important to our mission—and it is one of the reasons that the Society is a force for peace though peace is not our special purpose.

My Friend "Mikhail"

I have previously discussed many of the wonderful things that happened at the Society's first conference in 1971, but I did not mention what was for me the most wonderful of all because it seemed to validate my epiphany that the World Future Society would be a useful instrument for achieving world peace.

Shortly before our first conference was to open, I was contacted by a Soviet official stationed in Washington. I will call him "Mikhail" because I don't feel comfortable mentioning his real name.

Mikhail wanted to attend our conference, and I assured him he would be most welcome. In fact, I was absolutely delighted that a Soviet dignitary would show an interest in what we were doing. After all, it was my existential dread of thermonuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States that originally set me thinking hard about the future and led eventually to the founding of the World Future Society.

Mikhail introduced himself almost the moment I arrived at the conference, which was being held in the Washington Hilton Hotel. It was then that we had the first of a number of conversations in the hotel's hallways.

As the conference proceeded, I anxiously rushed around, popping briefly into the breakout sessions



Portly **Herman Kahn**, an unmistakable presence at the Society's first conference, was widely vilified for coolly describing the potential horrors of future international conflicts in his book *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), but he was a hero at the Society's first conference thanks to his 1967 book *The Year 2000*, one of the monuments of futurist literature. His moon-faced likeness emerges serenely from a doomsday blast in this painting from the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Besides *On Thermonuclear War*, Kahn's other books included *Thinking About the Unthinkable* and *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. His presence at the 1971 meeting might also explain the interest taken in it by "Mikhail," a Soviet official.

being held simultaneously in different meeting rooms to make sure everything was going smoothly. In doing so, I got the impression that Mikhail had some supernatural power to be everywhere at once, and each time he noticed me, he would come out with me into the hallway, and we would have a chat. By the time the conference closed, I may have spent more time with Mikhail than anyone else.

I now remember little of what Mikhail and I talked about during our hallway conversations, but one thing made a deep impression on me. Near the end of our conference, Mikhail said very emphatically, "I see no sign of war." He seemed to be genuinely surprised at the peaceful nature of our conference, and I was surprised that he was surprised. Just what had he expected? Angry speeches denouncing the Soviet Union? Chants of hatred (as in George Orwell's book *1984*)? Displays of U.S. weaponry? Naturally, there was nothing of the sort.

Following the conference, Mikhail invited me to his office, which was not in the Soviet Embassy but in a nearby office building. I was not clear about what Mikhail wanted, but nothing could keep me from going. When I arrived, Mikhail greeted me in a friendly manner but re-

mained at his desk during our conversation, while I sat wondering when he would get to the point. Our meeting did not seem to be just a social occasion. I don't remember him ever smiling, laughing, or saying anything humorous or personal. And he never offered me a drink, which I thought a little odd for a Russian.

We just sat and talked. He did not ask me probing questions about the Society or anything else. Instead, he meditated aloud about abstract economic and political matters. At one point, he said that he believed that private property was the basic cause of social problems. However, he expressed his view of private property in a way that suggested to me that he was not really sure of his opinion and wanted me to either confirm or challenge it.

I didn't feel like challenging any of Mikhail's views, and he did not push me to reveal my own. Instead, he simply continued to meditate aloud while I sat, mostly silent, waiting to find out what he wanted. I could not invite him to my home because my wife and I were far too busy on our World Future Society work and taking care of our young sons to socialize. In addition, our house was too much of a mess to entertain a Soviet dignitary. What

would he think if he discovered that the great World Future Society's "offices" consisted of nothing more than the back porch and one adjacent room in a shabby house in the suburbs?

After about an hour, Mikhail seemed ready to bring our meeting to an end. We parted company cordially but rather formally, and I went away still wondering what our meeting was all about. Why had Mikhail attended our conference and what did he want with me? Was our conversation being secretly recorded?

I never learned the answer to those questions. But I believe Mikhail's stiffness and caution was due to the fact that he—like other citizens in Communist nations at the time—had to conform rigidly to Communist Party doctrine or suffer dire consequences. At the same time, Mikhail was genuinely concerned to know the *real* truth about what was happening in the United States and world at large and hoped that the Society's conference and his conversation with me would help him to clarify his thoughts.

Mikhail and I never saw each other again. I never had either the time or the money to visit him in Moscow, and if he ever came to Washington, he didn't let me know. But several years after our meetings in 1971, he sent me a copy of a book he had written on the future. Unfortunately, it was written in Russian and my knowledge of that language is so rudimentary that I could not judge its content without spending far more time on it than I could afford.

But after Mikhail returned to Moscow I made a point of inviting him to the Society's conferences in 1975 and 1980. He responded very kindly with letters written in Russian, which I did translate laboriously with the help of a dictionary. Though friendly, the letters were rather formal—just as his manner had been when I met him. In each case, he said he could not attend personally but one or more of his colleagues would attend, and I believe they did though they did not make themselves known to me in the way Mikhail did.

After 1980, I became so busy that I

stopped sending Mikhail special invitations, but whenever I encountered a Soviet representative—at one of our conferences or elsewhere—I would ask if he knew anything about Mikhail. From them I learned that Mikhail had risen high in the Soviet government.

During the 1980s—in the midst of those extraordinary events that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union—I noticed Mikhail's name in newspaper stories about what was happening, and I was very impressed. My work always kept me too busy to pay close attention to what the press was reporting, but I got the feeling that Mikhail was playing a very difficult but very constructive role in world history. I like to think that the World Future Society helped him to do that.

Reconciling Old Enemies

Mikhail was not the only person at the 1971 conference who offered support for my epiphany. Another noteworthy participant was Yoneji Masuda, a Japanese techno-economist. A native of Tokyo, Masuda had become a prophet of the computer age that lay ahead.

I was old enough to remember when his nation had attacked mine in 1941, killing thousands of Americans, and he was old enough to remember when my nation rained fire



Yoneji Masuda, whose native Tokyo was firebombed by American aircraft during World War II, became one of the World Future Society's most enthusiastic supporters. The Society later became the North American publisher for Masuda's book *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society* (1981), a "computopia" or utopian vision of a society based on computers.

bombs on his hometown and then obliterated two other Japanese cities with nuclear bombs. But those tragic events were set aside, because we were both focused on the future.

Masuda became a strong supporter of the Society and one of our institutional members. In 1980, when I went to Tokyo to speak at a Johnson Wax conference, I had an opportunity to call on Masuda in his office. There we worked out a deal for the Society to become the U.S. distributor of his book *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society* (World Future Society, 1980). A few years later, our Board member Kenneth W. Hunter presented to Masuda the Society's Distinguished Service Award at a ceremony in Salzburg, Austria.

Another person attending our first conference was Heinz-Hermann Koelle, who had been a pilot in Nazi Germany's air force during World War II. As a correspondent in London in the 1950s, I had often wandered, during my lunch hour, amid the rubble-strewn lots where buildings had stood before being leveled by German bombs. One bomb had hit a building just across the street from where I worked.

But, as with Masuda, Koelle and I never even mentioned the war because we were busy thinking about the future. He had become chairman of the Berlin Center for Future Research, and he proudly showed me a mockup of the future-oriented journal, *Analysen und Prognosen*, that his group planned to start. Some months later, I began to receive copies of it.

The Power of the Future

The success of our first conference in enabling enemies of both the past and present to discuss the future as friendly colleagues convinced me that my epiphany was valid. Thinking about the future really does have



Heinz-Hermann Koelle, a former pilot in Nazi Germany's air force who had become chairman of the Berlin Center for Future Research, was an active participant in the 1971 conference.

the power to liberate people from the burdens of past and present—the unpleasant memories that make us resentful and suspicious of each other and the never-ending crises that demand everybody's immediate attention and keep us distracted from what we can do to create a better future world.

By setting aside—even if only temporarily—the burdens of the past and present, we can think about the exciting things we can do by working together for a better future world. For that reason, the World Future Society really does have the potential to become a powerful force for world peace.

The future also provides a valuable common ground for people who do not know each other well and have different backgrounds, interests, and attitudes. Finding common ground is critically important in human relations but often hard to achieve—even when everyone concerned belongs to the same organization. A Ford Motor Company executive summed it up when he confessed to me, "We don't talk to each other very well."

To provide common ground for group discussions, major corporations often call in a futurist to meet with their executives. By hearing a general discussion of the major trends shaping the future world that everyone will share, members of a group have a framework for communicating more meaningfully with each other about the important issues that concern their group. Focusing on their common future, they can transcend the petty fears and jealousies that too often obsess their thinking and limit interactions to comments about sports and the weather.

Besides providing common ground for group discussions, thinking seriously about the future enables us to anticipate many opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, so that we can prepare to deal with them effectively. Foresight is, I believe, the gateway to wisdom.

But good foresight for individuals and organizations is not enough. Today we need global foresight if humanity is to survive and prosper in the years ahead. Rapidly advanc-

ing technology is radically reshaping our planet's natural environment and revolutionizing our everyday lives even more than we recognize. Progress makes our lives increasingly comfortable physically, but it is undermining our traditional customs and values, leaving us feeling rootless and uncertain. Today, our human enterprise is like a great ocean liner packed with passengers but with no one steering the ship and no known destination.

Most people believe that politicians are the ones to deal with our perplexing global problems, but my experiences as a young journalist reporting on politicians in four nations convinced me that we cannot expect politicians to solve our great world problems. It's not that politicians are stupid or evil. On the contrary, I found the politicians I dealt with to be mostly intelligent, well-meaning, and very likeable folks trying to do difficult jobs as well as they could.

I vividly remember when Harry S. Truman unexpectedly took a seat next to me in a restaurant while I was with a pack of journalists following him around. As I sat, frozen to my chair with awe at being face-to-face with the man who had ordered atomic bombs dropped on Japan, I was struck by his sheer humanity. He was smart and charming but had no magical powers. He was a fallible human being like myself, yet he had been given the godlike power to consign thousands upon thousands of people to their deaths in Japan and later Korea. The scale of those horrors passes all understanding, yet I could not blame him for his decisions. In his situation, I might have decided history the way he did.

The world's political systems cannot solve the momentous problems we face. These institutions must be revamped and new institutions developed. But it was not until I began developing my proposal for a World

Future Society that I realized that this Society might play a key role in that process.

A World Future Network

After the Society's first conference confirmed my epiphany, I began to envision the Society as the nucleus of a global network of thoughtful people sharing a common interest in exploring the world's future. Our members constituted a stupendous intellectual resource that could light the way for humanity as it moves into a future filled with extraordinary potential, enormous risks, and mysteries beyond our comprehension.

Our members willingly accepted the challenge of thinking about a subject that most people refuse to think much about at all, and they demonstrated the power of the future to enable people to overcome atavistic grudges and misunderstandings.

But for it to become a truly significant force for peace or anything else, I knew that the Society needed to grow much bigger, and that, I knew, would be difficult since we had so little money. Despite the success of our first conference, our financial situation remained precarious, even desperate. We had no money for

development, no money for any emergency that might come up, and no money for the staff needed to coordinate the efforts of our volunteers.

We also could offer nothing but moral support for our chapters, which were now multiplying in number and often had ambitious plans. Talking to chapter leaders, mainly on the telephone, forced me to offer explanations why we could give them no help, and this embarrassing task became something of a strain on me because of the other work I had to do.

On one occasion, Konrad Dannenberg, a member of our Huntsville, Alabama, chapter came to Washington to get support for a conference



Harvard psychiatrist **Chester Pierce**, a specialist in youth problems, told Society members that if children are educated to be planetary citizens "we will have done much to insure civilization on this earth."



Caltech geochemist **Harrison Brown**, author of *The Challenge of Man's Future* and *The Next Hundred Years*, returns to his seat after addressing the Society's 1971 conference. "Forecasting is, I believe, key to our survival," Brown told the audience. Applauding at right is conference chairman **John Gerba**.



Conference chairman **John Gerba** savors the success of the Society's first conference. Back to camera are **Janet Carson** (left), one of the housewives who worked part time at the Society's headquarters on the back porch of the Cornish home, and **Suzanne Pineau**, a professional conference planner who helped plan the Society's first big meeting.



Soviet futurist **Igor V. Bestuzhev-Lada** of Moscow's Institute of the International Labor Movement was an early reader of THE FUTURIST, which published his article "Utopias of Bourgeois Futurology" in December 1970 along with a review of his writings on the future. Publication of this article may have led to the mysterious presence of a Soviet representative at the 1971 conference.

the chapter was planning. When I went to meet Konrad at the Old Stein, a German restaurant on Connecticut Avenue, I found him sitting in a booth with five other German rocket scientists. They kept silent while Konrad and I discussed the Huntsville chapter, but suddenly I realized that the man I had forced to move aside so I could squeeze into the booth was the infamous Werner von Braun, whose rockets had terrorized Britain during World War II. This was another validation of my epiphany but also another embarrassment: I could offer the Huntsville chapter nothing at all. I could not even afford to travel to their meeting to lend my support.

After the conference, I continued to search for an answer to our money problem, but could find none. So we were forced, again and again, to raise the dues, and that had the effect of discouraging many people from joining, especially young people and people living in poor nations.

My efforts to get support from foundations and philanthropists proved almost completely unavailing, partly because I am a poor salesman but also because I had little time for soliciting funds. Meanwhile, only a couple of my colleagues seemed willing to try to raise funds and they came back virtually empty-handed.

Obstacles to the Society's Future

There appear to be a number of

serious obstacles to raising funds for futurist activities. One hurdle is that most people have great difficulty understanding that it really is possible to think more realistically about the future. It's certainly true that we can't know much at all about the future—but that little bit we can know is critically important for making wise decisions.

A second obstacle is that the future of humanity is everybody's business, and whatever is everybody's business is treated as somebody else's business, certainly not ours.

A third obstacle is people's feeling that we should solve all immediate problems before trying to deal with any future problems. This fixation on immediate problems, however trivial they may be, leads nations as well as individuals and organizations to lurch from one crisis to another, always too busy with the current "crisis" to forestall the next.

A fourth obstacle is that people like to deal with well-defined problems that can be solved quickly using a direct approach that produces quantifiable and photogenic results. People hate coping with problems that are poorly defined, bafflingly complex, and impossible to solve quickly using a direct, well-approved approach. (In the seventeenth century, an approved approach to illness was to pray to God or a saint or, if that failed, to burn a witch or two.)

A fifth obstacle is that we cannot show on television the victims

of future wars. We now live in a visual culture where TV images have largely displaced the human imagination. So the orphans of future wars have no standing because their faces cannot now be seen on television. Nor can their cries be heard.

A sixth obstacle is that futurist publications are unattractive to advertisers because futurists as a group are not big consumers of any substantial category of goods.

These obstacles continue to keep the World Future Society impoverished, so the Society has never been able to realize its potential.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the Society has survived into the twenty-first century and still lives in hope while the mighty Soviet Union has faded into history. Back in 1971 when Mikhail and I had our chats, I don't think either of us dreamed that things would turn out quite that way.

Next: A groundbreaking conference focusing on energy helps crystalize the challenges ahead for the Society and the world. □



About the Author

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