

DID NOSTRADAMUS DO SCENARIO PLANNING?

OR

THE IMPORTANCE OF FUTURES STUDIES NOW

BY

J. RICHARD EMENS

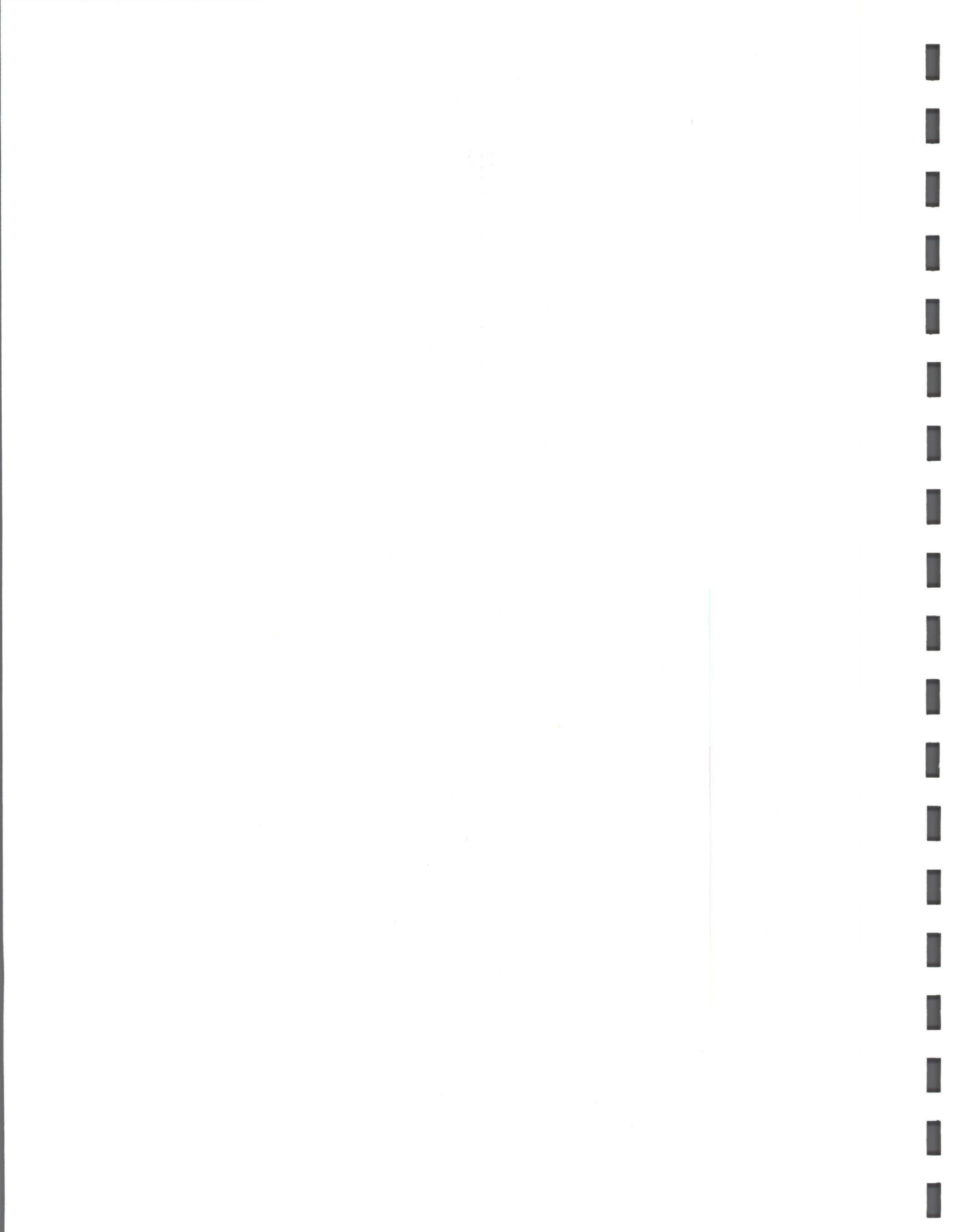
OCTOBER 15, 1996

The alternative title has not been given to my fellow Kit Kat members until this evening. The reason is obvious. With the label "The Importance of Future Studies Now" some of you become immediately aware of what we will be discussing this evening. The admonition I received when asked to speak was to have the title not disclose the subject. A positive answer to the question in the original title would likely be deemed blasphemous by Futurists, which is one reason I would like to defer that discussion.

It is interesting to note that at the second program meeting of our Kit Kat Club on December 7, 1911 "a general discussion of palmistry . . ." occurred.¹ On the surface, that might seem related to the topic this evening, but again futurists would disagree.

In considering Future Studies, a number of questions arise:

- I. What is Futures Studies?
- II. When did Futures Studies begin?
- III. Who are recognized as leading Futurists?
- IV. What are some meaningful Futures Studies?
- V. What are the basic principles of Futures Studies?
- VI. What are the purposes of Futures Studies?
- VII. What is the work of Futurists?
- VIII. Do Futurists make predictions?
- IX. What methods are used by Futurists to study the future?
- X. Futures Studies covers what time frame?
- XI. Is Futures Studies appropriate for teaching?



XII. What are the philosophical foundations on which Futurists base their knowledge of the past, present and future.

XIII. Why Futures Studies now?

We do not have time for complete answers to all of these questions, nor are they needed. I recognize that all of you here this evening are planners. Many of you have been actively engaged in long-range planning in your professional and personal activities, and a number of you are members of the World Futures Society and know much about this subject.

Before providing responses to the questions, I ask you to imagine a man and his son from Ohio who wish to take a canoe trip on a river they have heard of located in the western United States. They travel west, rent a canoe, go out to the river, and get in the canoe. It is a beautiful afternoon. They start down the river; there is very little current; and both the father and the son paddle. The canoe glides through the water quietly and moves downstream. After a time of looking at beautiful scenery, the son, who is sitting in the bow of the canoe, realizes he does not have to paddle much for the canoe to move at the speed it has been, and the father notices that he is only using his paddle for steering, not to provide forward motion, as the river current is more rapid than it was before. As they come around a bend in the river, they hear a noise off in the distance and the canoe moves forward even more rapidly with less paddling. While the father and son are wondering what the noise might be, it becomes louder and the canoe moves even faster with no paddling, only slight steering. As they listen and look toward the river bank they notice there are now rock walls and it appears they are going into some kind of a gorge; the noise is louder, and the canoe is moving even more swiftly. The father and son realize simultaneously that the noise they hear is water going over a falls and both try to turn the canoe to head toward the rocky shore. By this time, the water is moving so fast and with such force that they are unable to progress towards shore.

None of you in this room would have been in that canoe as it went over the falls. Why? Because you are planners. Planning, especially as change quickens, is vital.²



So what is Futures Studies and who is a Futurist? In my opinion, Futures Studies is structured studying of the future and planning for change. However, Michael Marien writing about the subject in "The Encyclopedia of the Future" believes it is not that straightforward; he states:

Futures Studies lacks a shared understanding of what it is and a shared vision of what it ought to be. The collective study of the future . . . is known as "Futures Studies," to emphasize alternative futures. . . . Futures Studies has little to do with science fiction, . . . Future Studies, at its best, draws from the natural and social sciences . . . Some contend that Futures Study is a field of study or even a discipline. Little evidence is given to support this wishful assertion. In time, the embryonic enterprise of future studies may develop into something resembling an academic field of study or a discipline. . . . Futures Studies may be conceived as a very fuzzy "multifield," or the key integrative core that enables a broad and long term approach to human understanding. . . . There are no set qualifications for someone to be a "Futurist." Some call themselves forecasters, trend watchers, planners, policy analysts, social critics, environmentalists, . . . others call themselves Futurists, but as a secondary identity thereby retaining their primary identify as a sociologist, consultant or other professional practitioner. . . . In a 1993 survey only 25 percent identified themselves primarily as Futurists, with another 43 percent calling themselves secondarily Futurists. The most popular primary identity indicated by 34 percent . . . was as planners."³

According to well known futurists Joseph Coates and Jennifer Jarratt, ". . . Futurist is widely used as a catch-all term for people interested in long-term issues."⁴

The common use today of the term, "Futures Studies" probably comes from a poll done in 1975 by the World Future Society. In that poll "Futures Studies" and "Futures Research" received a net positive response while the other terms in order of preference were: "future analysis, futuristics, forecasting, futurology, prognostics, futurics, and futuribles."⁵ As business and professional people, we tend to think of Futures Studies as long range planning or long term strategic planning.

Edward Cornish, president of the World Future Society and editor of the Futurist Magazine speculates that the characteristics of a Futurist are: openness to experience,



global outlook, long term time perspective, ecological orientation, broad concern for humanity, rationality, pragmatism, reality of choice, interest in values, optimism, and sense of purpose.⁶

When did Futures Studies begin? As we are defining it, Futures Studies started in the twentieth century. But we know that people have been studying the future for at least as long as there is recorded history.

The forerunners of Futures Studies were scholars and scientists "who wanted to apply knowledge to solving human problems . . . [by taking] historical fact and scientific knowledge and [adding] human values and imagination to create images of what may happen in the future."⁷ An example is Plato in the "Republic" which begins a long series of utopias and dystopias that run to Francis Bacon in *New Atlantis* and "on to the many visionaries, ideologues, and propagandists of the last 100 years."⁸ Another is H. G. Wells who stated in 1902 "I believe quite firmly that an inductive knowledge of a great number of things in the future is becoming a human possibility. I believe that the time is drawing near when it will be possible to suggest a systematic exploration of the future."⁹

Futures Studies is recognized as beginning in the mid-twentieth century with Bertrands de Jouvenals *Futuribles* Group in France, the Club of Rome, the Commission on the Year 2000, think tank Rand, and other research organizations.¹⁰

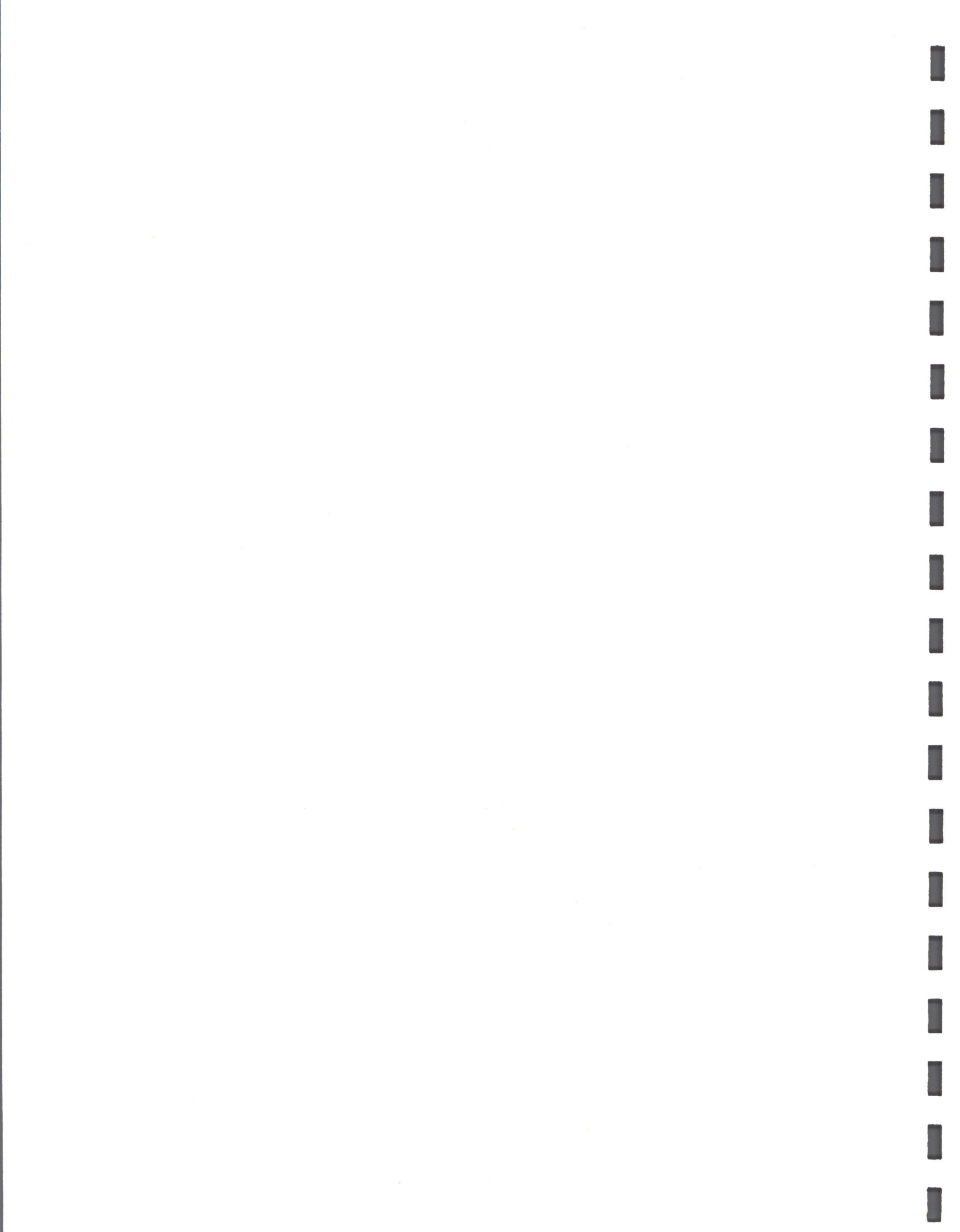
There has been serious organized study of the future going on around the world during the mid-to-late twentieth century in Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe, Russia and the United States.

Recent interest in Futures Studies is demonstrated by the World Future Society eighth annual conference in July 1996 in Washington, D.C. drawing nearly 1,700 attendees. The World Futures Society now has more than 20,000 individual and 10,000 institutional members.¹¹ Among the leading Futurists present at the Washington meeting this summer were Joseph Coates, Jay Ogilvy, Arnold Brown, Hazel Henderson, Michael Marien, Graham, T.T. Molliter, Richard Slaughter, Wendell Bell, Warren Wager, and Hugues Jouvenel; all of whom appear on the list of 100 most influential Futurists in the aforementioned *Encyclopedia of the Future*.¹² Leading Futurists according to the same listing begin with Buckminster Fuller, Herman Kahn, H. G. Wells, and Peter Drucker.¹³



Accepting for purposes of our discussion that Future Studies is utilization of recognized methods to develop alternatives for dealing with change in the future, the following can be identified as meaningful futures studies:

1. "The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society" (1973) by Daniel Bell.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Daniel Bell describes himself as a social theorist and not a futurist.¹⁵
2. "Future shock" (1970) by Alvin Toffler.¹⁶
3. A recent publication which I believe deserves to be mentioned both as a meaningful Futures Studies work and as a Futures Studies text, is Wendell Bell's "Foundations of Futures Studies, Human Science for a New Era"¹⁷ (1997) in two volumes; Volume I covers history, purposes and knowledge, and volume II covers values, objectivity and the good society. Dr. Bell, emeritus professor and former chair of the Sociology Department at Yale, maintains that Futures Studies, like other fields from anthropology to zoology, has a body of sound and coherent thought and empirical results that can fit within the covers of a book and can be the basis of a serious course of study.¹⁸ His references list nearly 750 books and articles by more than 450 authors.
4. Typical of Futures Studies work today is the Shell Oil scenario study of the late 1960's and early 1970's described so well in Peter Schwartz's book, The Art of the Long View¹⁹ (1991). In 1968 Pierre Wack was a planner in the London office of Royal Dutch/Shell in a department called Group Planning. He was looking for events that might affect the price of oil which had been relatively steady since World War II. Oil was a strategic commodity; consuming nations did what they could to keep the price low, since their countries' prosperity depended on oil. Wack recognized several key facts; the United States was beginning to exhaust its oil reserves while its demand was rising and OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) was showing signs of flexing its political muscle. Wack's research also indicated the Arabs could and would demand much higher prices for their oil prior to 1975. Wack and his



group wrote two scenarios about the future with tables of projected price figures. One presented the conventional wisdom at his company: somehow the oil price would stay stable. The second scenario described an oil price crises sparked by OPEC. Wack found he needed to describe in vivid detail the full ramifications of oil price shocks in the second scenario to get the necessary action steps taken at Shell. In October 1973 there was an oil price shock with a worldwide energy crisis. Of the major oil companies only Shell was prepared. Shell rose during the following years to be one of the two strongest global oil companies.²⁰

Wack and Schwartz attribute the success to helping Shell management "reperceive -- to question their assumptions about the way the world works, so they could see the world more clearly."²¹

What are the basic principles of Futures Studies? Futurist Eleonora Barbieri Masini's view is that there are three principles. The first is that there is a constant dilemma in Futures Studies between knowledge on the one side, and desire and fear on the other.²² The second principle is that the only space on which humans can have an impact is the future; and, the third principle of Futures Studies is that there is not one future but many possible futures. In looking at these possible alternative futures, many futurists recognize that the future can be looked at in terms of the possible, the probable and the preferable future.²³

What are the purposes of Futures Studies? Professor Wendell Bell has said "the most general purpose of futures studies is to maintain or improve the freedom and welfare of humankind, and some Futurists would add the welfare of all living beings . . ."²⁴ Bell goes on to say that "the purposes of Futures Studies are to discover or invent, examine and evaluate, and propose possible, probable and preferable futures" and describes what he says are the nine major tasks of Futures Studies:

1. The study of possible futures;
2. The study of probable futures;
3. The study of images of the future;
4. The study of the knowledge foundations of Futures Studies;
5. The study of the ethical foundations of Futures Studies;

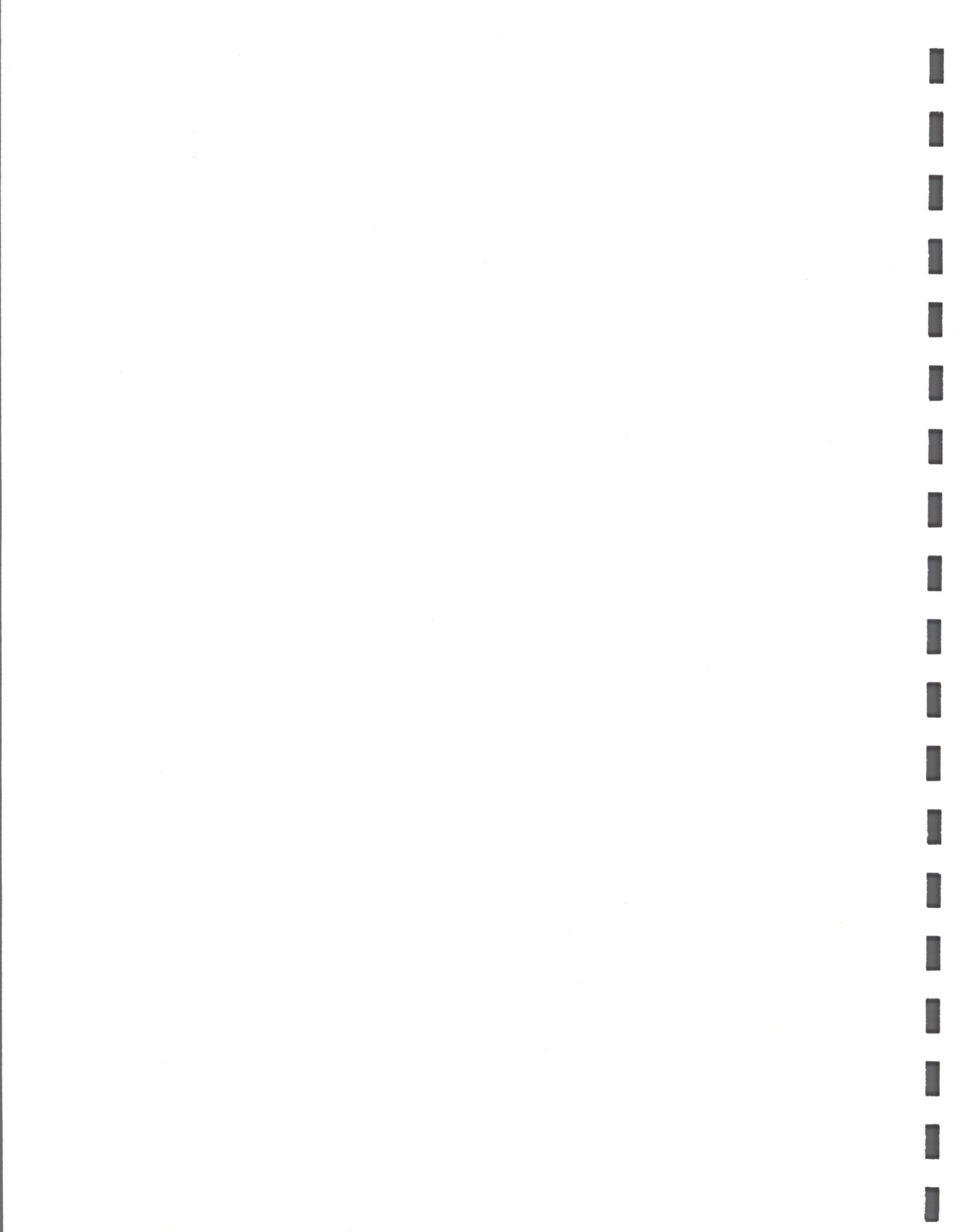


6. Interpreting the paths of orientating the present;
7. Integrating knowledge and values for designing social action;
8. Increasing democratic participation in imaging and designing the future;
9. Communicating and advocating a particular image of the future.²⁵

What is the work of Future Studies? Futurist Joseph Coates of Coates and Jarrett describes the work his firm does for Fortune 500 companies thus:

We are primarily doing three related things . . . trying to point out to them that there are things coming out of left and right field that are going to converge on their business in 5, 10, 20, 50 years which could have either major beneficial or disruptive effect. So our first objective is to widen their horizons. The second objective . . . is to point out how those implications 5 to 50 years in the future have implications for action today . . . But its the third thing that we are trying to do which is really the nut of the matter. If you think about corporations that have gone out of business or government projects that have failed or nonprofit activities that haven't amounted to anything, they all share a characteristic. A single individual or sometimes a small group of people at the top of the organization have some assumptions about the future that are unsound. So we look to the future for our clients to help them become aware of their assumptions about the future . . . We try to evoke their assumptions about the future by presenting them with some pictures of the future . . . If the client says oh . . . I agree with that completely. That's wasted motion. Its when we get the response, couldn't happen, never, no way. That's when [we can help] . . . Them because the question [then] is, why exactly do you think this could not happen? And no sooner do they open their mouths when they've revealed some assumption and that then becomes the focus of concentration. So the whole purpose of looking to the future is to get at the client's assumptions and help them to understand them, make them explicit, ventilate them, and possibly change them.²⁶

"Changing mindsets or re-perceiving the world"²⁷ is the work of the Futurist. Futurists do not go to the conventional sources of information but seek out unusual people who have their finger on the pulse of change who can see significant but surprising forces for change. Utilizing the tools of future studies, Futurists develop two



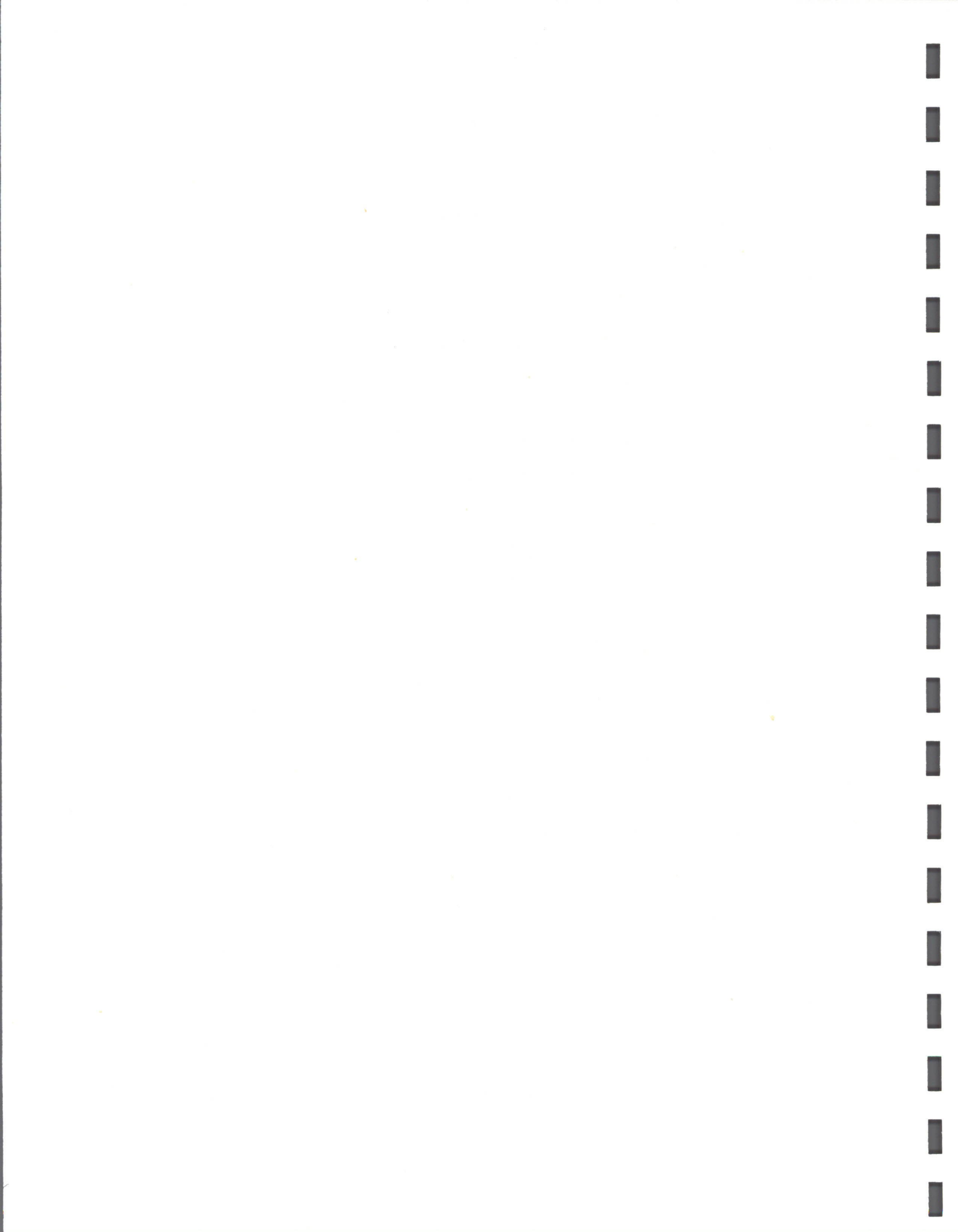
to four believed to be accurate pictures of tomorrow to change the mindset of the decision makers for acting in the future.

Do Futurists make predictions? Peter Schwartz says "scenarios are not predictions."²⁸ At a session of the July 1996 World Future Society Annual Meeting, several leading Futurists had an interesting dialogue: Arnold Brown, Chairman of the New York Futurist firm of Weiner, Edrich and Brown stated his firm persuaded people that it knew the future. Jay Oglivy of Global Business Network in Emeryville, California spoke next and stated that his firm did not know what the future was going to bring but tried to articulate alternative scenarios because "we're generally deeply convinced you cannot know the future." Arnold Brown then backed off and said "could I correct an apparent misapprehension, I guess I didn't make myself clear. We don't claim to know the future at all . . . We do not predict the future ever."²⁹

Joe Coates says "the notion that Futurists are mainly concerned with predicting the future is one of the persistent myths that futurists have to live with."³⁰ Professor Wendell Bell has presented what appears to me the most appropriate answer to this question. He says "we can and do make predictions all the time . . . Predictions are a necessary part of decision making and planning both in the worlds of planners, statesmen and other leaders and in the every day world of ordinary people pursuing their individual projects."³¹ In my own view, Futurists predict but they call it "forecasting" or "alternative scenarios" so that they will not be grouped with the mystics, the palm readers, the astrologers, the diviners and others believed not to be scientific.

So, did Nostradamus do scenario planning? My research indicates that the answer is no. Certainly Nostradamus did not do scenario planning as it is defined today. In fact, most Futurists would tell us that Nostradamus should not even be mentioned when one is considering Futures Studies as Nostradamus was a diviner, an astrologer. In a March 1, 1555 letter to his son, Nostradamus said that the source of his prophecies came from "astronomical assurance . . . And through the divine will . . . because God Almighty has wished to reveal them"³²

What are the methods used by Futurists to study the future? There are a number of methods and techniques in Futures Studies with methodological diversity being a key concept. Examples of these methods are survey research, trend



extrapolation, the Dephi method, cross-impact analysis, simulation, computer modeling and scenario planning.³³ Wendell Bell's position is that scenarios provide a unity to futurists methodology and are present in all futures studies, as futurists are creating stories. How futurists try to make the stories "plausible [will] vary greatly, depending on the methods [chosen] to collect, organize and present the data on which their stories are based".³⁴ Distinction is often made between quantitative and qualitative analysis on the one hand and exploratory and normative on the other. Methods that are objective, systematic and explicit are more easily assessed for their reliability and validity than methods that are subjective, unsystematic and implicit although the results of the former are not necessarily more true but just more open to scrutiny.³⁵

One issue that is particularly intriguing to me arises in searching for the preferable alternative. While it is logical to believe that forecasting and development of alternative scenarios should be an objective exercise, once the expectation becomes that of selecting a preferable alternative, utilization of value judgments are usually necessary. Volume II of Wendell Bell's "Foundation of Future Studies" does an excellent job of outlining practical strategies for judging preferable futures and carefully analyzing values. He attempts to provide the basis for making value judgments objectively – focusing specifically on how do we decide what is preferable and going so far as to attempt to identify universal human values which is where this line of thinking leads us.³⁶

What time frame does Futures Studies cover? The time frame that appears to be accepted by most Futurists today is five to 50 years. However, as might be expected much futures work is done that goes well beyond 50 years. In fact, the Encyclopedia of the Future contains an interesting chronology of the future going to 1 trillion A.D. and beyond.³⁷ It appears that today's well recognized Futurists do most of their work for major corporations, trade associations and governmental entities in the five to 25 year horizon.³⁸

Is Futures Studies appropriate for teaching? I believe so. And people much more knowledgeable than I have so stated: H. G. Wells in 1902;³⁹ and in 1950 Margaret Mead proposed that every university should have a chair of the future.⁴⁰ A number of course study materials are available. One excellent publication of the World



Future Society, "Prep 21 Future Studies Worldwide; Preparing for the 21st Century"⁴¹ is a course program guide containing a selection of future oriented courses taught in programs at universities in the United States, Pakistan, India, England, Russia and Australia. Several rationales for futures education exist, including: rapid structural change tends to make many past assumptions, meanings and purposes redundant; careful forward thinking -- or foresight -- is preferable to crisis management; images of futures profoundly condition the present and affect what people consider to be worth doing; and "most young people are already interested in futures."⁴² With the publication this fall of Wendell Bell's two volume work "Foundations of Future Studies," I believe that the teaching of Futures Studies will become even more prevalent. His work contains excellent materials which can be utilized for teaching.

There will probably continue to be the debate over where Future Studies fits into a university curriculum. Should it be taught in the history department, the sociology department, the anthropology department or the economics department? My guess is that while many universities will recognize futures studies as transdisciplinary, in future years it will be recognized as a distinct field of study. At the present time it will continue to be taught in any one of the previously mentioned departments.

Or, it may well end up in the business school of some larger universities because of the increased utilization of Futures Studies by major corporations. It seems logical to expect one or more visionary entrepreneurs who have accumulated a zillion dollars will want to endow a chair in Futures Studies (as Margaret Mead envisioned) in a school of business. What we are talking about is long term planning and the methods of futures studies will be increasingly utilized by businesses for their long term planning. I expect at some point in the future, scholars will look back at the late twentieth century with humor or disbelief at the struggle to recognize Futures Studies as a necessary part of our education.

The philosophical foundation on which futurists base their knowledge of the past, present and future starts with the question, do we care about future generations? If the answer is no, then we need not spend time discussing philosophical foundations for considering the future. Most of us, however, will give a positive response to that



question and we are thus into considerations which Wendell Bell covers so ably in Volume II of his "Foundation of Futures Studies".⁴³

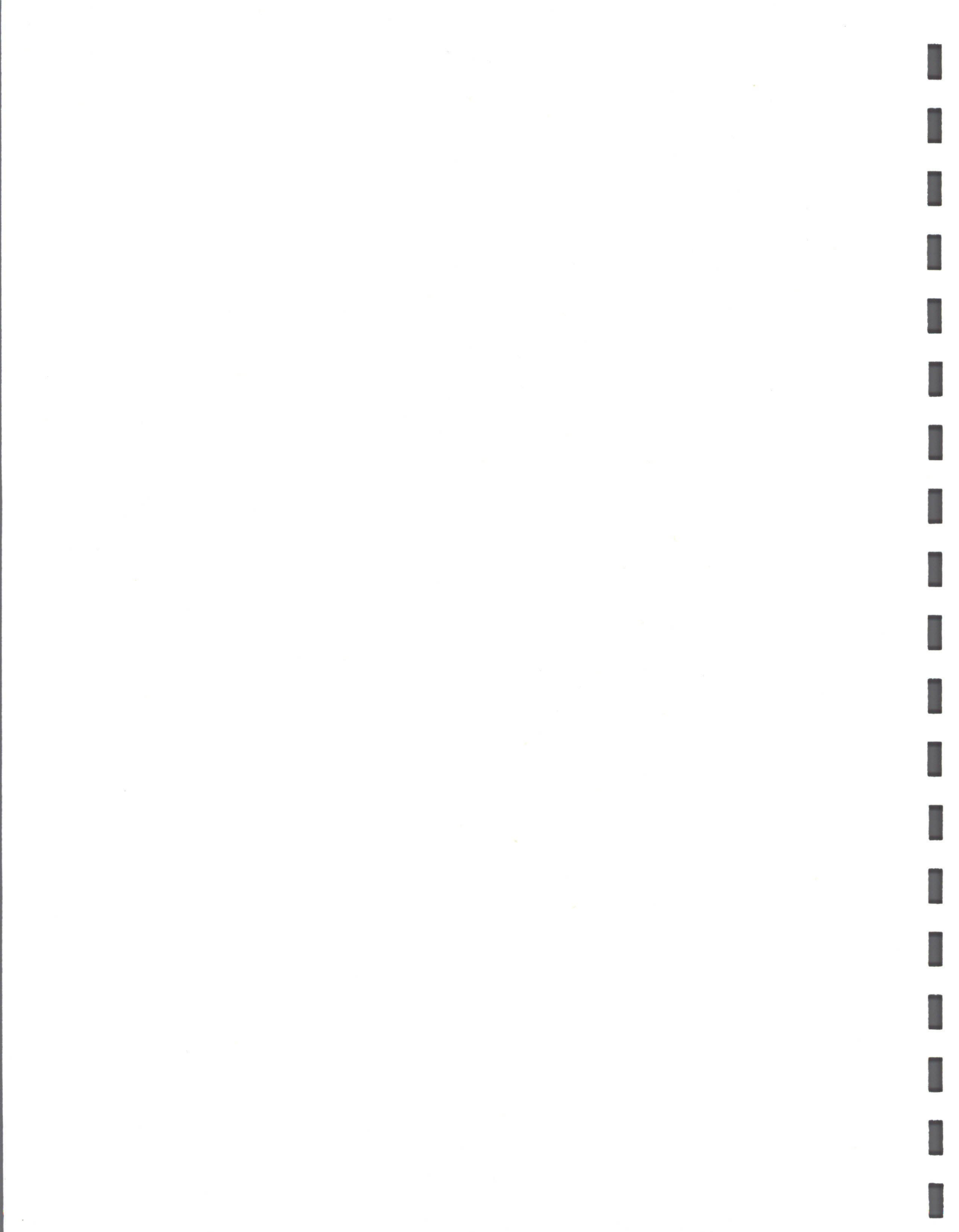
Why is Futures Studies important now? We return to the canoe ride. You will remember that the current became faster and the canoe moved more rapidly making it apparent that prior planning of how to navigate the river would have been helpful. All of us lived through the energy crisis of 1973 so we can appreciate the benefits to Shell Oil of Pierre Wack's scenario work. Today we are constantly bombarded with the words "change," "accelerating change," "rapid pace" and similar phrases. Whatever the speed of change, clearly, there are major changes going on so long term planning is advisable. What better way to help people do structured planning than by teaching courses at the university level on the concepts and methodologies of Future Studies, and at least to include the basic concepts of Futures Studies in middle and high schools. The coming of the millenium will cause many people to focus on the future, so it gives those who believe futures studies important, a platform to encourage utilization of the recognized tools of the field.⁴⁴ We are very fortunate this year to have two excellent teaching and learning tools to encourage the study and teaching of future studies. First, the two volume "Encyclopedia of the Future" containing views of the future on over 450 subjects. Secondly, Wendell Bell's two volume work, "Foundations of Futures Studies," which provides substantial research and excellent course materials.

More and more often, Futurists are being recognized as being a part of a legitimate profession, as evidenced by Joe Coates recent statement, "Today when I say I am a futurist I seldom get the comment, 'Oh, where is your crystal ball?'"⁴⁵



ENDNOTES TO
THE IMPORTANCE OF FUTURE STUDIES NOW
J. RICHARD EMENS
OCTOBER 15, 1996

1 THE KIT-KAT CLUB OF COLUMBUS 1911-1983, *The Kit-Kat Club* 15 (1984).
2 Alice to the Cheshire Cat:
 "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"
 "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat.
 "I don't care where-" said Alice.
 "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the cat.
3 LEWIS CARROLL, ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND 85 (1941)
4 1 ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE FUTURE 364 (George Thomas Kurian, ed., 1996).
5 JOSEPH F. COATES & JENNIFER JARRATT, WHAT FUTURISTS BELIEVE at foreward (1989).
6 EDWARD CORNISH, THE STUDY OF THE FUTURE 257 (1977).
7 *Id.* at 184-86.
8 *Id.* at 51.
9 *Id.* at 53.
10 *Id.* at 70.
11 1 WENDELL BELL, FOUNDATIONS OF FUTURES STUDIES, HUMAN SCIENCE FOR A NEW ERA 29-47
12 (1997).
13 Telephone Interview with Susan Eckard, Director of Membership Department of World Future
14 Society (October 13, 1996).
15 2 ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE FUTURE, *supra* at 1077-78.
16 *Id.*
17 DANIEL BELL, THE COMING OF POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY: A VENTURE IN SOCIAL FORECASTING
18 (1973).
19 COATES & JARRATT, *supra* at 11.
20 ALVIN TOFFLER, FUTURE SHOCK (1970).
21 1 WENDELL BELL, *supra*.
22 *Id.* at xix.
23 PETER SCHWARTZ, THE ART OF THE LONG VIEW (1991).
24 *Id.* at 7-9.
25 *Id.* at 9.
26 ELEONORA BARBIERI MASINI, WHY FUTURE STUDIES 6 (1993).
27 *Id.* at 8.
28 1 WENDELL BELL, *supra* at 7,8.
29 *Id.* at 75-95.
30 Tape of Conference on "How Futurists Can Work Effectively with their Clients" held by the World
31 Future Society (July 15, 1996) (on file with author).
32 PETER SCHWARTZ, *supra* at 10.
33 *Id.* at 6.
34 Tape of Conference on "Studying the Future and Acting in the Present" held by the World Future
35 Society (July 16, 1996) (on file with author).
36 COATES & JARRATT, *supra* at vii.
37 Tape of Conference on "The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies" held by the World Future
Society (July 17, 1996) (on file with author).
JEAN-CHARLES DE FONTBRUNE, NOSTRADAMUS, COUNTDOWN TO APOCALYPSE xxi (1983).
1 WENDELL BELL, *supra* at 239-317.
Id. at 240.
Id. at 243.
1 WENDELL BELL, *supra*.
2 ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE FUTURE, *supra* at 1076.



38 Tape of Conference on "How Futurists Can Work Effectively with their Clients" held by the World
Future Society (July 15, 1996) (on file with author).
39 EDWARD CORNISH, *supra* at 69.
40 EDWARD CORNISH, *supra* at 130.
41 PREP 21-FUTURE STUDIES WORLDWIDE; PREPARING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (H.F. Didsbury, Jr., ed.
1994).
42 RICHARD A. SLAUGHTER, FUTURES - TOOLS & TECHNIQUES (1995).
43 2 WENDELL BELL, *supra*.
44 EDWARD CORNISH, *supra* at 217-28.
45 Tape of Conference on "How Futurists Can Work Effectively with their Clients" held by the World
Future Society (July 15, 1996) (on file with author).

