

freshmen look at — 1961

MILTON KLONSKY

ON ONE of those balmy days in early Spring, when only the present seems of any importance, I was perverse enough to ask my class in Freshman English at Columbia University to write a theme on what the world would be like in 1961, or, if they chose, what they themselves would be like in that far-off time.

This assignment was greeted by the groans it deserved. With the world in bloom outside, the boys

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did not want to dwell on the possibilities of wars, hot or cold, inflations or depressions. But they bent over their desks, scribbled, yawned, stared off into space, scribbled, stared at me, tore up scrap paper, and wrote until the bell rang. The prophecies they handed me were as various as the students themselves.

Many took their cue from General Marshall's prediction that the next decade would be a period of great tension. One student, who sat in the back row of the class like Cato in the Roman Senate, and whose opinions on all subjects from girls to politics were usually grim and always final, had this to say: "It is inevitable that the nations will be clogged in the great machines

that the super-states of Russia and the United States will become. People will be little more than coiled springs, ready to snap and leap at one another."

While his opposite and foil in class, a redhead who never spoke except to make some wisecrack, conceived this communiqué from the battle front of 1961: "General Jones today announced that after three days of hard fighting, the UN army finally came within a mile of the city of Pyongyang. The General is of the opinion that the Chinese Communists, who have lost more than 75 million men since they entered the Korean War eleven years ago, are finally weakening and that victory for the UN is likely in the near future." As for the home front during this period: "A two room apartment now rents for \$300 a month, and butter is \$2 a pound — just $\frac{1}{3}$ the price of meat. . . . But don't worry," he adds reassuringly, "we're still fighting inflation."

A student from New Hampshire, inspired perhaps by the approach of summer and the end of the college year, described the sort of propaganda which would be used in the "frozen war." "There are no more pamphlets, no more cheap mimeographed bales of paper. We seduce them with three-dimensional pictures of home, their farms and their mountains. Our 'leaflets,' if they can be called such, are perfumed with the scent of pine needles

or hay, and one batch even smells like horse manure."

A student brought up on the blocks and in the subways of New York saw it all from a different angle. Propaganda will become so frenzied, he predicted, that the war will actually begin with the following announcement from Stalin in a "deep basso voice": "All Americans are dirty, bourgeois warmongers, and Margaret can't sing a note." This is immediately countered by President Truman, now in his sixth term, speaking in a "Missouri falsetto": "Gentlemen, we are no longer faced with a choice. We are dealing with double-dealers, men who do not have the capacity for rational thinking. For, assuming Stalin's first statement to be true, where does it follow that my daughter can't sing?"

THE FEW STUDENTS who saw some hope in world politics wrote in a grave and serious manner. It was almost as though they expected the horse-laugh of history to contradict them at any time. Their essays were timid, wistful, and a little pathetic.

One anticipated that Stalin would die, and so set off a revolution in Russia ending the threat of war. Another looked forward to a "world super-state, much stronger than the UN, which would control the political fate of mankind." A third expected the present alignment of Russia vs. the United States to

shift, so that Russia, for her own survival, would find herself allied with the West against the East, headed by China and India.

However, settling for a continuation of the status quo and its tensions, an N.R.O.T.C. student, about to leave college, envisaged life in the Navy in 1961. "Naval life will be a great hardship then because I'll have nothing to do but rest, sail, fish, and visit Hollywood, and I'll soon be bored . . . At least fifteen days out of every thirty will be spent on leave, with additional time for holidays and celebrations. But in ten years, there will also be greater freedom for women, and after some girl takes me out for a while, I'll get her to propose and we'll settle down."

Life in the Army, however, will be slightly different. One large sweater-wearing, gum-chewing and back-slapping student, a fullback on the Frosh football team, whose themes I had noticed previously for their witty and original grammar, described a typical day at "Camp Breakdown." "I put on my khaki underwear, khaki shirt, khaki pants, khaki belt, khaki socks, khaki shoes. Then I combed my hair with a khaki comb and pulled the khaki covers over my khaki bed." After a thirty-mile hike before breakfast with a full pack of "compressed proteins" and "atomic grenades" on his shoulders, followed by a dressing-down from his sergeant, he philoso-

phizes: "Thus I exist, sleeping, dreaming, marching, grouching — but I'm still living and I guess that's what counts, anyhow."

Forecasts for civilian life were divided just as evenly between black gloom and millennial optimism. Two students from the Middle West, both tow-headed, both highly intelligent, and both deeply concerned with the drift of world politics, saw two very different worlds awaiting them.

"As a result of atomic energy," wrote one, "we will have an era of prosperity beyond any golden age of the past — Periclean Athens, the Italy of the Medici, the England of Elizabeth or the America of Coolidge." His friend could imagine only "a mass of ruins, all art and morality destroyed, and the few people left killing one another for food. At best we will have the greatest depression ever seen. We will not find the familiar bread line again, however, but what will be called the 'pill line.' There will be no bread to give away, for all the arable land will have become radioactive."

As might be expected, there was a great deal of futuristic spoofing.

"The dreams of a 'Flash Gordon' will be realized," predicted one usually sober-minded physics major, "with moving sidewalks, commercialized atomic energy, movies become 'feelies,' 'tasties,' and 'smellies,' family rocket ships, cosmic

ray treatments in the womb to make everybody beautiful, and all that." Another, in the same vein, predicted that the proper names of people would become numbers for purposes of better classification. "Poets will address their odes to lovely x-97 or shy g-55, instead of to Chloe or Amaryllis."

One rather spare and ascetic looking student, a major in Political Science, who wrote all his other papers with the assigned minimum of words exactly counted out, became expansive on this subject. "The moon by '61 or bust," he began. "We are living in what you might call a pregnant age — Homo Sap must give birth to Homo Superior or perish."

THOSE STUDENTS who chose to describe themselves rather than the world in 1961 expected fewer marvels and prodigies of change. They were to be doctors, engineers, architects, millionaires of no special kind, and one even a race-track commissioner at Churchill Downs. The architect would have his office in a mid-town New York skyscraper of no special design; and the engineer pictured himself as a "big industrialist working on a second million — but not too strenuously."

The future doctors, however, seemed to expect a hard time. One of them saw himself living on some desolate outpost. "I shall come down from the mountains into their

burning cities and deliver their babies into the world."

A young poet, a shy, aloof boy with a perpetually distracted air, who used to show me his verses written in the melancholy style of "The Shropshire Lad" and "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," found the assigned theme much to his liking. "What could confront me in ten years that is foreign to me now?" he asked. "I might be disillusioned, but I am disillusioned now. I could be happy, but I knew happiness years ago. I feel sure that I will be economically stagnant, if not unstable, for I am among the most unaggressive of people and can only conquer the world in my dreams. . . . Of course, my world will not really be as I have described it. I will either be dead, or the rest of the world will be dead."

His counterpart in class, a high-spirited, glad-handed football player, who did as little work and took as many cuts as the Dean would allow, was wryly humorous about it all: "Life will still involve struggling with other men. While some of these will be stronger, I consider my chances for survival very good, for my greed, coupled with my very mean heart, will surpass their vices — or virtues."

One of the saddest themes of all came from a student majoring in Business Administration, who imagined himself the head of a family with six children. "Little did I

know what I was getting into," he mourned. "Our first child was fine, and the second, maybe the third; but now, the novelty of being called 'Daddy' has worn off. My life is a full-time grind — six days at the office and six children at home. This is living?"

Another student, however, with "eight kids, I think," and a wife whose "beauty has never been altered for all her hardships," finds family life so pleasant that he often feels "a sudden urge to burst forth with a song."

I WAS REASSURED to find some themes which predicted things would remain very much as they are. "Ten years from now," wrote a student majoring in Anthropology, "people will make love, go to baseball games, the movies and the beaches. We will still have a bickering Congress, and government scandals. Cars will go faster, and we'll have bigger TV screens in color. But it will still be the same old world."

Columbia itself is pictured in one essay, written by a student about to leave for the Army, as it would appear at an alumni meeting in 1961.

"On the whole, the 'old place' looks much the same. The same trees, same buildings, same flag-poles, same deans — all very near the way we left it. As usual, the program consists of the same speeches we heard as Frosh, with the same 'ahems' sprinkled throughout."

Even New York, the cement and steel campus of the university, will be little changed by 1961, according to a student from Missoula, Montana. "The police are still trying to discover who set fire to the tenements in 1955. . . . To pay for the newest increase in subway fare, the Mayor has had a 17 cent coin minted with his face engraved on it. . . . Brooklyn has seceded from Greater New York, and is threatening to form a new nation with the Republic of Texas. . . . But the people of New York themselves will be the same as they were in 1951 — always in a hurry."

The final word, however, came from a student who had painted a particularly glorious and easeful future for himself. "I expect the year 1961 will be a good one for me — it's 1962 I'm worried about."

Which is perhaps very much the way it is going to be.



***Inflation — and too many misspent billions —
may cause our destruction***

How Stalin Can Win

Bonner Fellers

JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH Lenin predicted that some day “the United States will spend herself into destruction.” Are we now moving toward the fulfillment of this prediction?

Our Government has made world-wide commitments which, if not curbed, seem likely to wreck our economy. Since World War II, through the fiscal year ending June 30, 1952, the Federal Treasury will have disgorged two-thirds of its entire income for defense and foreign aid. Because of the lag in production, not quite all of *this year's more than one hundred billion dollar budget* can be spent. Nevertheless, appropriations actually exceed calculated income by \$38 billion! Our fabulous

spending program, with its resultant inflationary impact, has led us to a sinister paradox. The more we spend to contain Communism, the more we further its primary objective — the collapse of capitalism.

There has been a sharp rise in requirements for defense and foreign aid. During the fiscal year 1951, these two items demanded nearly \$25 billion — 57 per cent — of the \$45 billion budget. For the current fiscal year, defense and foreign aid account for \$77 billion — 75 per cent — of our unprecedented budget.

For the fiscal year 1952, the Army, Navy, and Air Force each planned an expansion to roughly one-third its World War II peak strength. The Army asked for twenty-seven divisions, equipment for an additional twenty-four and a total of 1.6 million men. The Navy contemplated a strength of nearly a million men, and the reactivation of *half* its twenty-eight large carriers.

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