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Looking Forward...and Backward

by Jay Herson



Essays looking to the future are as common a January occurrence as the appearance of storefront tax preparation services. Writers looking 50-100 years hence are typical but *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* once published an essay that looked forward 1144 years. Even more amazing, the essay was published in January of 1856. It is appropriately titled "January 1, A.D. 3000". Reading this essay today teaches us as much about antebellum America as it does futurism at that time.

The narrator wakes up in 3000 A.D. and is told that he is in the world capital, Peerless City, Isle of Borneo. National divisions were eliminated many years ago. What used to be the United States of America is now called the Republic of United Interests, a region devoted entirely to the financial services industry. By contrast France makes the gloves, Timbuktu has the monopoly on tailors and milliners. In Peerless City the shoemakers, tailors, painters, bakers, bankers, lawyers and doctors all have their own neighborhoods where they live and work. All houses are identical.

One of the USA's last glorious acts was conquering China in 2207 and Russia at about that time. The Emperor of China was made a Regional Postmaster and that of Russia was given a position in the Customs Office. During periods of war Paris was destroyed although there is still considerable evidence that it was a grand city.

For transportation people take the bomb ferry for shorter commutes. For long hauls they take the steam balloons. Peerless-New York in 1 hour 32 minutes, Peerless to Peking in 47 minutes. Railroad expansion became so prevalent that there was not enough room for agriculture so subterranean railroads became popular and were still in vogue in 3000 A.D. In most industries, like steam balloons, there are many competitors at first. Then companies pay people to use their service. Eventually only the competitor with the most money remains and a monopoly is formed which our 3000 A.D. descendants found to be the most efficient form of business.

Alcohol, tobacco and certain foods had been outlawed for ages having been found to be "injurious to the human frame". At a restaurant the narrator finds 67 kinds of bottled water on the menu—spring water, rain water, water filtered by charcoal, stone or gravel, etc. He gasps when a bill for \$7.27 arrives for two bottles of water, padded by labor costs. Infant mortality had been reduced from 80% in 1856 to "only" 57% in 3000 A.D. This was accomplished by strict diets and specialized care for the first 15 months of the newborns life. At that time the infant's trade or profession is decided. Marriage is arranged, not by families, but by the Secretary of the Marriage Department. For people concerned about their appearance surgeons can adjust the appearance of the nose and reduce waist size by as much as 32 inches.

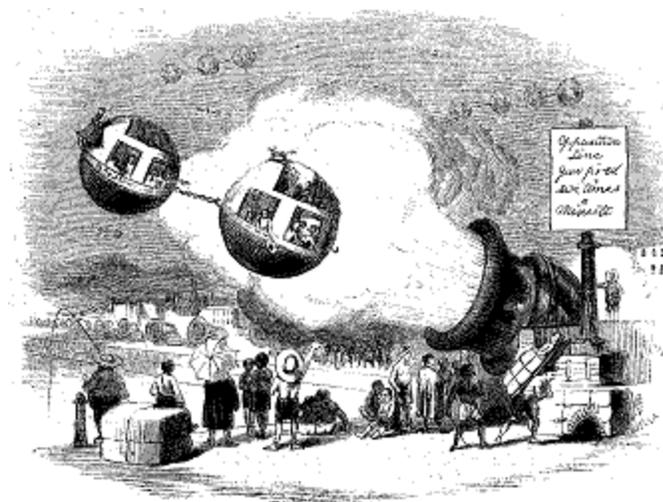
A Universal Education Act ensures that all children get a complete education. There is some concern that college classes are still taught in Tibetan even though the language has been scarcely used since 2000 A.D. Among the technology admired by the narrator—pipes for electric telegraph, heat, light, water and fresh air coming directly into every home; knives, forks and decanters all do their work “without human attachment”; coal is easily transformed to diamonds; time is instantly accessible from a ring worn on the little finger.

The main newspaper on Earth is the *Everlasting Word* which appears and replaces itself on paper continuously providing 3 miles of reading matter every 24 hours. The *Word* covers every possible subject and is now the main distribution channel for books. Photographs of a scene 10,000 miles away are instantly transformed to paper in the subscriber’s home.

It is interesting what the writer could envision without knowing about electronics apart from the telegraph—mass transit, government intervention in health, robotics, plastic surgery, bottled water, China and Russia as world powers, and even internet-like news. Even the new railroad industry is seen to eventually move toward monopoly although this seems to strike the writer’s fancy. There is much information about what the pre-Civil War writer does not write about—the environment, occupations other than shoemakers, tailors and painters, chronic disease and medical progress that can only reduce infant mortality to 57%. He/she is obviously affected by growing sectionalism which causes him/her to see a world without war and where every country has its role in the world order. The last holdout in ending nationalism is said to be South Carolina, curiously the first Southern state to secede six years before the essay’s publication. Like many Utopians the writer fails to see that a world without problems is itself a problem.

Do any of our readers want to take a stab at life in 3000 A.D.? You can send your ideas/essays to forum@futuretakes.org.

The complete essay “January 1, A.D. 3000” can be found at <http://harpers.org/AD3000.html>. **Jay Herson** is Managing Editor of FUTUREtakes.



Passengers in 3000 A.D. awaiting the arrival of a bomb-ferry.