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Multiple Choices: Paradoxes of the Coming Century

A Book Review by Ira Mehlman

PREPARING FOR THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Paul Kennedy
New York: Random House, 1993
512 pp., \$25

If Paul Kennedy had written *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* ten years ago, he would, no doubt, have been hailed as a great visionary. While still a worthwhile read in 1993, there is little that anyone who is prepared to plow through its 428 pages has not already seen in one form or another many times before. *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* is chock-full of interesting new facts and data, but while some of the lyrics may be new, I suspect that among the book-reading public, the tune is already quite familiar.

To begin with, *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* may be a slightly misleading title. One might suspect that it is some kind of how-to book, only on a grander scale. But unlike books that tell you how to invest your money, tune your engine, lose 20 pounds or meet members of the opposite sex, the advice this book offers is more like the dreaded kind you might get from your pilot: "Put your head between your legs and hang on."

Perhaps the greatest benefit *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* offers is that it puts the full spectrum of challenges that await us all in one place, between two covers. One can only admire the scope of the book as it explores issues of demography, culture, technology, environment, agriculture, economics and the interplay these various disciplines are likely to have with one another. Behind every promise of the 21st century lies a hidden danger and every potential pitfall holds the promise of some new breakthrough.

It is the detailed and meticulous exposition of the myriad paradoxes of the 21st century that exposes the book's most glaring weaknesses. While it seems Kennedy's intent was to produce a guide book to the coming century, time and again he leaves the reader stranded at every fork in the road.

The striking contrast between *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* and a book like Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance*, is that Gore not only shows the reader where the forks in the road are, he unequivocally states his ideas about which course ought to be taken.

In time Gore will be proven a prophet or an alarmist. Kennedy, however, seems unsure, or unwilling, to take a strong position on any of the options that we will be faced with in the coming decades.

A recurring theme throughout the book is the pivotal role demographics will play in shaping the world order in the next century. Over and over again, Kennedy draws the connection between explosive international population growth and all other issues with which the world will have to deal. Yet, like the atheist in the fox hole, each time Kennedy builds a case to prove the deleterious effects of unchecked population growth, he inevitably finds some reason to doubt himself.

This is particularly true when he looks at conditions in the developed nations of North America, Europe and the Pacific Rim. Kennedy seems quite capable of going on for page after page detailing the horrors of overpopulation in the underdeveloped world, while continuing to worry about whether the economies of the developed countries will be able to survive without a growing population and lots of young workers. "While the demographic explosion (combined with reduced resources) is the greatest problem facing the developing regions, many developed nations confront the opposite problem of stagnant or even negative population growth," writes Kennedy. As a result, in the coming century the "developed nations [will] have to look after fast-increasing millions of persons older than sixty-five," with fewer working age people to support them.

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Though with a clear lack of enthusiasm, Kennedy seems to lean toward immigration as a solution to what he perceives as the developed world's demographic dilemma: "it seems unlikely that there will not be great waves of migration in the twenty-first century," he says. But "large-scale immigration raises

the fear of losing control of national boundaries and traditional sovereignty," Kennedy acknowledges.

In fact the concern is so great that Kennedy goes so far as to venture into territory that has gotten other observers into deep trouble: "[a]s the better-off families of the northern hemisphere individually decide that having only one or at the most two children is sufficient, they may not recognize that they are in a small way vacating future space (that is, jobs, parts of inner cities, shares of population, shares of market preferences) to faster-growing ethnic groups both inside and outside their national boundaries. But that, in fact, is what they are doing." A 11 o f Kennedy's concern about whether the West can remain economically viable without either pro-natalist policies or large-scale immigration could be allayed if he'd simply read some of the other chapters in his own book. In chapters dealing with Japan's role in the 21st century and one on the robotics revolution, he maps out the most viable models for success in the post-industrial world. Japan, he notes, is one of the most rapidly aging societies on earth. However, "Not only did Japanese industry ease its labor shortages without destroying the social peace, it also avoided the path followed by German firms — or, for that matter, companies in New York and California — of importing large numbers of guest workers."

The Japanese have managed, quite successfully, to compensate for a changing demographic structure, by investing their capital (they have tons of it) where the cheap labor is, without importing the cheap labor itself. More importantly, Japan has invested heavily in the cheapest labor of all — robotics. In one table, Kennedy lays out the solution to the West's demographic dilemma (if it is a dilemma at all):

World Industrial Robot Population, 1988

Japan	176,000
Western Europe	48,000
USA	33,000
Rest of World	23,000
TOTAL	280,000

Equally important, Japan has trained the workers who used to do what robots now do, to perform the more sophisticated tasks required in a technological world. Given the sorry state of our own educational system, replacing unskilled workers with robots would create perhaps the supreme paradox of the 21st century: the machines that could greatly enhance our quality of life would also marginalize a large segment of our population. People will not have jobs and will not be able to afford the benefits of this technological revolution, unless there is an accompanying revolution in education.

Perhaps the most intriguing ideas about the 21st century that are presented in this book are those that deal with the future viability of the nation-state. Though Kennedy has a chapter devoted to precisely

this topic, he actually presents it much more provocatively in a chapter that addresses the communications revolution and the rise of multinational corporations.

While Karl Marx dreamed of "one world" controlled by the proletariat (a dream which ultimately failed), Kennedy draws a picture of "one world" controlled by the likes of IBM, Mitsubishi and other multinationals. Though the nation-state thoroughly dominates all aspects of modern life, it is a relatively new institution. While few of us can conceive of a world without nations and sovereign governments, it has to be asked whether these social institutions — first formulated in pre-Renaissance Europe — will be viable in an era of the "global village."

Kennedy observes that, "the main creators and controllers of technology have increasingly become large, multinational corporations with more global reach than global responsibility." Whereas the concept of citizenship and mutual responsibility between the individual and the state have been the dominant social dynamic for the past several centuries, relationships in a world dominated by multinational corporations are likely to be purely financial. Nation-states, even bad ones, have fates and identities inextricably linked to their populations. Citizens view their relationship to their nation-state as a lifelong part of their own identities. For better or worse, being a member of a nation-state is an important part of who they are.

The same kind of relationship can never be achieved between an employer and employee. The primary responsibility of a corporation is to produce a profit for its stockholders. Unlike a citizen who is not pulling his or her own weight, an employee that is not useful to a profit-making institution can easily be disposed of. The globalization of commerce, in which corporations play an increasingly dominant role, but have little or no national identities and loyalties, could give new meaning to the concept of "new world order." It is the kind of new order that worries Kennedy. "Far from producing a solution to the gap between the world's 'haves' and 'have-nots,' the changing structures of international business and investment may exacerbate them."

At its best, *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* can provoke the reader to begin thinking about some of the realities the nation and the world are likely to face in the next several decades. As Kennedy takes us through the myriad problems and Catch-22's that await us, it is easy to understand why he is reluctant to suggest any solutions, although you find yourself wishing he'd go out on a limb anyway. *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* is an important book, but, because it lacks the boldness to offer solutions to the problems it raises, it falls way short of being the seminal piece it appears Kennedy wanted it to be. ■

[Ed. Note: see the concluding paragraph of Otis

Graham's review on page 299.]