

THE FUTURE  
TAKES  
FOREVER :  
BECOMING FM-2030

BY BENJAMIN TIVEN

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1972, THE NOVELIST AND FUTURIST FERÉIDOUN M. ESFANDIARY PUBLISHED AN EDITORIAL ON THE OP-ED PAGE OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* CONCERNING THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT. TITLED “A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR TRIBES,” IT ANNOUNCED THAT THE SITUATION HAD BECOME A “MONUMENTAL BORE”: THAT THE LEADERSHIP HAD FAILED, AND THE ANTAGONISTS, “ACTING LIKE ADOLESCENTS, REFUSE TO RESOLVE THEIR WASTEFUL 25-YEAR-OLD BRAWL,” EVEN AS OTHER NATIONS OF THE WORLD WERE “RAPIDLY PATCHING UP THEIR DIFFERENCES.” ESFANDIARY DECRIED THE VIOLENT STALEMATE OVER TERRITORY, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE WORLD WAS, IN ANY CASE, “IRREVERSIBLY EVOLVING BEYOND THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL HOMELAND.” CITING A RECENT UNITED NATIONS STUDY ON GLOBAL YOUTH, HE EXTOLLED A “NEW KIND OF POPULATION, MORE RESILIENT AND ADAPTABLE THAN THEIR ELDERS,” WITH A “FEELING OF WORLD SOLIDARITY AND A SENSE OF COMMON RESPONSIBILITY TO ACHIEVE PEACE.” IN A FUTURE THAT WAS JUST AROUND THE CORNER, TODAY’S YOUTH WOULD TAKE CARE OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI PROBLEM—IN PART BY REALIZING THAT IT WAS ALREADY OBSOLETE. HE CONCLUDED THE PIECE WITH AN EXASPERATED INJUNCTION: “LET US GET ON WITH IT.”

The day after the article was printed, the Palestinian terrorist group known as Black September took eleven Israeli athletes hostage at the Olympic Village in Munich. After a tense standoff and firefight, all eleven Israelis, a German police officer, and five of the eight Palestinians were dead, a vivid and depressing reminder that the proverbial tribes were indifferent to the news of their obsolescence.

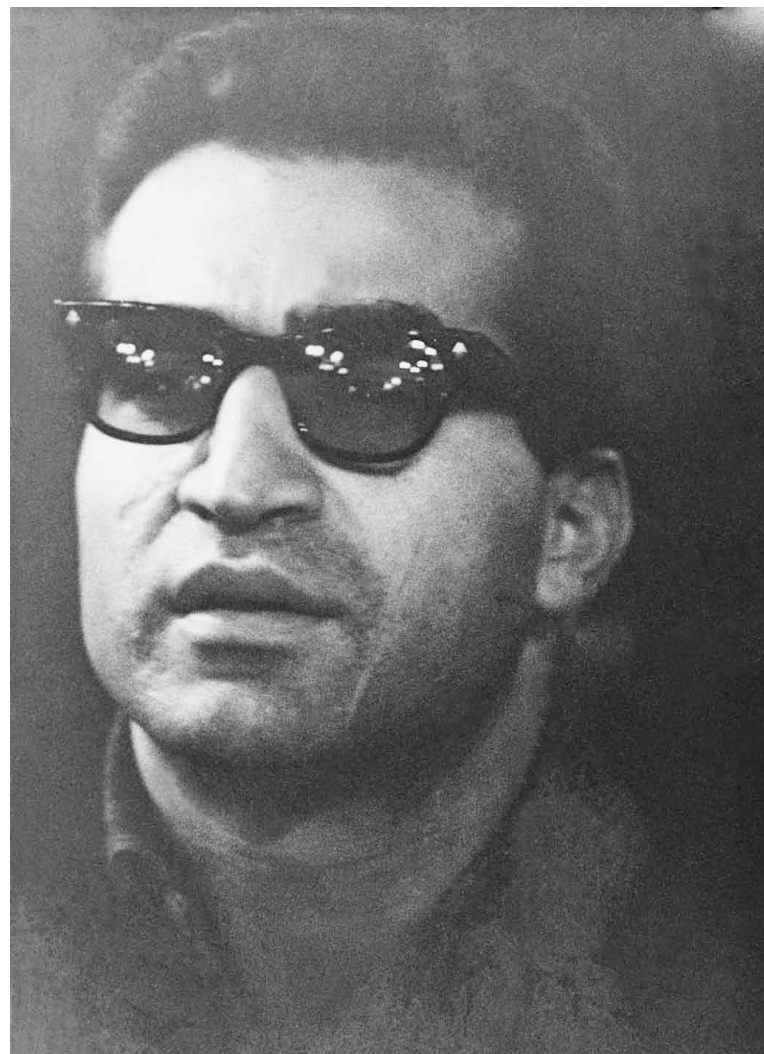
But Esfandiary was undeterred. As he had written elsewhere, even if the Middle East remained mired in a squabble over territory, humanity in general was moving on. “We can never again be content with civil rights, human rights, the right to self-determination,” he said.

“These rights by themselves are no longer enough. We now want cosmic rights. We want the freedom to roam the universe. We want nothing less than the freedom to determine our own evolution.”

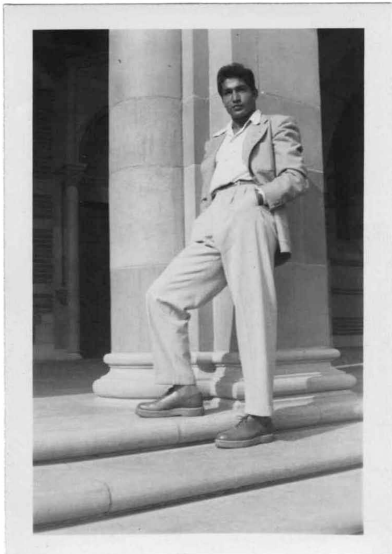
Fereidoun M. Esfandiary was born in Belgium in 1930. A diplomat’s son, he shuttled between Europe and Asia, spending time in India, Iran, and Afghanistan, and was educated in the UK and British Palestine, in Jerusalem. He was handsome and athletic, playing for the Iranian national basketball team at the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. He came to America for college, ending up at the University of California, Los Angeles. In the early 50s, after graduating, he tried his father’s trade, working a two-year stint at the newly formed United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, and moved to New York—to Barrow Street in the West Village—where he embarked on a career as a writer.

In a 1957 piece in *The New York Times Magazine* about mental illness in Asia and Africa, he described himself as “an Iranian now living in the United States,” and “a freelance writer specializing in the study of the social problems of the world’s under-developed societies.” Though he published in magazines like *The Nation*, *The Saturday Review*, and *The Village Voice*, the primary vehicle for his reflections on this theme was a series of novels. His first book, *The Day of Sacrifice* (1959), was part coming-of-age novel, part culture-clash, part spy thriller, set in 1950s Iran. Hailed as one of the best books of the year by *The New York Herald*, it was translated into eleven languages and put on a reading list for employees at the State Department. His second novel, *The Beggar* (1965), told a harrowing story of feudal life gone awry in an unnamed Arab village. And then there was *Identity Card* (1966), perhaps his most ambitious book. Semi-autobiographical, *Identity Card* told the story of an Iranian man raised in the West who felt drawn back to Iran, only to find himself thoroughly repulsed by its mixture of self-satisfied traditionalism and shah-era bureaucracy. It was a Kafkaesque fable of modern alienation, and it did not have a happy ending: Daryoush Aryana, the protagonist, was found lying dead in the gutter, anonymous, having lost and found and lost again the identity card that would have allowed him to leave. One reviewer noted that the author’s complex love-hate for Iran was the real, sometimes distracting, subject of the book;

**FREEFLY: USING A ROCKET BELT OR OTHER TECHNIQUE TO FLY AT WILL. FREEFLY WILL TOTALLY REVOLUTIONIZE ALL OUR AGE-OLD CONCEPTS OF BODY—TRANSPORTATION—COMMUNICATION—HOUSES—COMMUNITIES. WHY EVER WALK OR RUN WHEN YOU CAN FREEFLY? WHY ANY GROUND VEHICLE? WHY ANY GROUND HABITATIONS OR COMMUNITIES WHEN PEOPLE CAN FLY IN THROUGH WINDOWS OR WING IN AND OUT OF SUSPENDED HABITATIONS AND COMMUNITIES?**



All images courtesy of the F.M. Esfandiary Archive at the New York Public Library



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certainly there was a poignancy in Aryana's efforts to come to terms with his longed-for motherland, constantly undone by the self-consciously progressive habits of his deracinated, Westernized mind.

After *Identity Card*, Esfandiary rededicated his efforts to become a public intellectual. But he no longer described himself as an Iranian in America, and his new project represented an extreme intensification of his longstanding interests. "At no time in the past was the world in any way better off than it is today," he declared in *Optimism One: The Emerging Radicalism* (1970). His message was especially intended for those in underdeveloped societies, perhaps even Iran. "In their hypersensitivity to privations of the present," third-world romantics in Asia and Africa "squander fortunes inventing histories to show the world how illustrious they were at one time."

"No civilization of the past was great," Esfandiary insisted. "They were all primitive and persecutory, founded on mass subjugation and mass murder." Against a tide of books warning of global crisis, decline, and alienation, Esfandiary proclaimed the first Age of Optimism. Technology would universalize abundance; nations would disappear; identities would shift from cultural to personal. "The young modern is not *losing* his identity. He is gladly disencumbering himself of it," he wrote. "In the 21st century, no one will say 'I'm Egyptian, or Romanian, or American,' but 'I'm global,' or 'I'm moon-based,' or 'part Martian.'" He had, after all, been baptized in the model post-political utopias of the Olympics and the United Nations, our best efforts at what a global future might look like. Shrewd enough to notice the growing consciousness about technology in society, and with a knack for the American art of self-reinvention, Esfandiary became both prophet and showman: through his books, newspaper and magazine essays, public speaking engagements, university teaching, and business consulting work, he slowly made himself into an expert on our sublimely utopian future.

A taste for the outrageous was definitely part of the appeal of the trilogy of pop social science books he produced in the 1970s. After *Optimism One* there came *Up-Wingers: A Futurist Manifesto* (1973), its title a slightly odd but seemingly sincere play on words. ("Neither Right nor Left—I am Up.") And then *Telespheres* (1977), "the first thoroughly mapped overview of the new post-industrial world." The books were written in a fast-paced, oddly ecliptic English—which he termed "Unilang," the universal language—that eschewed adjectives and other old-fashioned excesses. "I have tried to approximate the rhythm of electronics," he later said. "Most books are too long, too wordy, too slow. They are written in the spirit and rhythm of print."

Esfandiary expounded enthusiastically on what would soon be the diverse results of the technological revolution: decentralized authority and post-bureaucratic democracies, genetic engineering, microcomputers, pharmaceutically and genetically enhanced brain activity, teleducation, telemedicine, teleshopping. The nuclear family would dissolve, replaced by shifting communities where children would form

no devastating emotional attachments (as, say, to parents) and people would be free to "link up" or "link out" as they chose. Robot-operated factories would increase our available leisure time; atomic and solar energy would be the twin engines of material abundance. Humans would spread out from Earth to colonize other planets, clad in specially designed suits that would protect our fragile forms from accidental death. Over time people would live longer and longer lives, until finally—soon!—we would live forever.

This last idea was perhaps his greatest theme. Immortality was not the stuff of myth or religion, he said: it was technologically possible—indeed, inevitable. Esfandiary became a standard-bearer for the nascent life-extension movement, and his lectures, classes, and books helped popularize the social rationale for cryogenic science. People were living longer lives than at any time in history, he noted, and the trend lines were only going up; already doctors could revive a stopped heart, or transplant a beating one, or substitute an artificial organ. "Bionics" was blurring the line between nature and technology, modifying our idea of what counts as human, as well as what counts as death. Once it became possible to transplant a human brain into a new body—whether human or bionically enhanced or robotic, it mattered little—the practical result would be immortality.

What's more, Esfandiary insisted, this brave new bionic world was desirable, and we should live our lives now in anticipation of our future selves. Practically, that meant following a proper diet, exercising, and avoiding stress—somewhat radical advice for the time. But it also meant overcoming the acceptance of death, in ourselves and in society. While no one in her right mind likes the idea of dying, common sense and millennia of religious thinking have conditioned us to accept, even embrace, mortality as the crux of our humanity. What was Frankenstein, that preeminent modern morality tale, but a warning that scientific efforts to escape our mortal lot would produce abominations? Esfandiary insisted on the progressiveness of progress and the radicality of optimism; to the suggestion that "to die is human," Esfandiary retorted that he was quite happy to move on to a "post-human" world. "If it is natural to die then the hell with nature. Why submit to its tyranny? We must rise above nature. We must refuse to die."

In a lecture called "The Longevity Revolution of the 1980s," Esfandiary made the fantastic claim that "if you're around fifty years from now, I'd say it's an absolute guarantee that you'll be around five hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, a million years from now, forever! To be sure... not in these gawky, clumsy, fragile, finite bodies, nor necessarily on this biosphere, on this planet. But we will be around. There are, in fact, many of us who are dying to attain immortality." And his enthusiasm found an eager audience: when Up-Wingers spawned a fan club of admirers who gladly took up the name, foremost among their vague yet definite goals was to "accelerate humanity's thrust to the next stage in evolution. Specifically we want to marshal humanity's genius to overcome our supreme tragedies—aging and death."

There was something quixotic about this

movement. The Up-Winger manifesto concluded: "We do not run for office, we do not seek power. We are a long-range movement with two principal functions: First. We are catalysts. We want to inform, stimulate, uplift. Second. We are activists. We want to launch projects to achieve our goals."

At a time of high anxiety—the Vietnam War, social revolutions, a galvanized political spectrum, the energy crisis, Cold War paranoia, crimes in the White House—Esfandiary and the Up-Wingers, ostensibly convinced that the future would render all this tumult moot, essentially became cheerleaders for the social byproducts of the military-industrial complex. A "movement" chiefly composed of sci-fi enthusiasts and LA suburbanites, the Up-Wingers vacationed together, held future festivals at Will Rogers State Park ("We've also invited several androids to be with us!"), celebrated "synergy," and generally spent their disposable income preparing for the coming abundance by pretending that it was already here.

The group was enough of a success that Esfandiary took back the name back for his consulting and production company. Up-Wingers Inc. provided "multi-track planning for the Future"—seminars for CEOs; corporate gatherings; lectures and symposia; talk show appearances, including a lengthy session with Larry King; and consultation to Hollywood productions, fact-checking the look and feel of the future.

It was a fine, if slightly surreal, arc for an Iranian national in the height of Cold War America: here was a voice on the Middle East with distinctly American interests, whose father was a career diplomat under two shahs, writing popular essays and books celebrating the fantastic successes of the robotic, pharmaceutical, aerospace, and engineering industries, and feeding those visions back into Hollywood productions and business seminars. He was a subject worthy of Kubrick or a CIA plot.

In 1966, the year Esfandiary published his final novel, *Time* magazine ran an essay called "The Futurists: Looking Toward A.D. 2000." That same year, the World Future Society was founded, an association of sociologists, corporate leaders, politicians, and science fiction writers. There was a wave of popular interest in the world we were building for ourselves, and Esfandiary was keen to ride it, creating a new career by capitalizing on the current scientific exotic: life-extension, colonies on Mars, global computer networks. But these same technologies, with all their bright promise, were also society's great anxieties. Under the frightening rubric of Cold War politics, it was just as easy to see robotics, cybernetics, and atomic energy as assuring our annihilation instead of promising our salvation. Fear was the secret sharer of Esfandiary's brand of optimism. He proclaimed that technology, the *bête noire* of his time, was a god who would save us rather than destroy us, perhaps even turn us into gods ourselves.

Predicting the future has a long history, from Zoroaster and the Delphic oracle to Jules Verne and Edward Bellamy, but its professionalization is of recent vintage, largely tied to the rise of

post-war science. Forecasters ("futurologists," though also sometimes "futurists") come from a broad suite of fields (probability, statistics, economics, robotics, networking, computer science, engineering) and attempt, of course, to divine where "things" (weapons, communications, society, technology, medicine) are going. Their agendas and predictions reflect this diversity.

Like the weather, the future is hard to get right all the time, but recently there are prevailing trends, and they tend toward the bleak. Bill Joy, the co-founder of Sun Microsystems, has warned of GNR: "genetics, nanotechnology, robotics... so powerful they can spawn whole new classes of accidents and abuses." The Australian robotics researcher Hugo de Garis thinks that there will be an epic war between partisans of artificial intelligence and their detractors, a kind of robot Ragnarok that will produce billions of deaths by the end of the century. The famed urbanist Jane Jacobs, in her book *Dark Age Ahead*, warned that the simpler failings of culture, education, and disintegrating communities would reinforce each other to undermine society over the coming decades. And there is, of course, the Unabomber, former UC Berkeley mathematics professor Theodore Kaczynski, whose vision of technology run amok frightened him enough to kill people in order to prevent it.

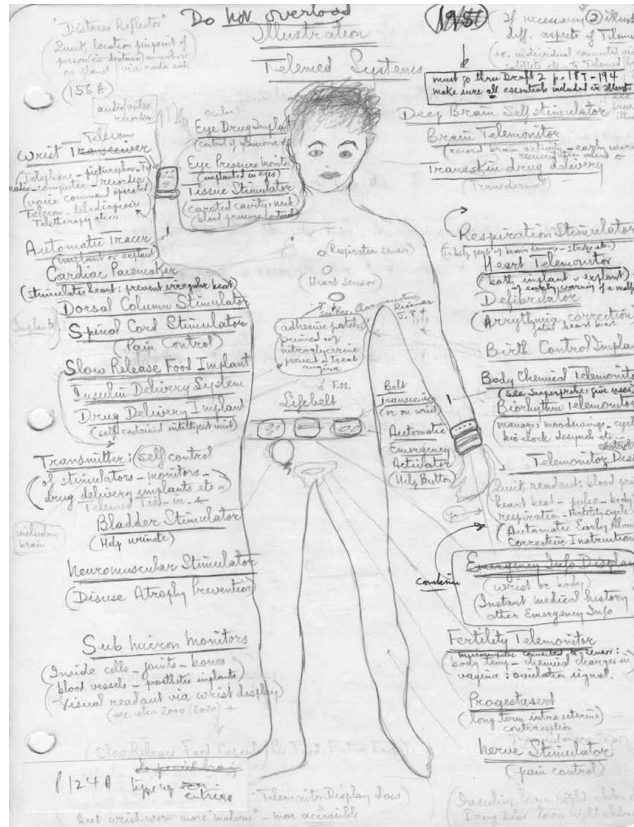
The field is not unilaterally pessimistic, though. Prominent thinkers like Raymond Kurzweil and Alvin Toffler (whose book *Future Shock* appeared the same year as *Optimism One*) predict positive social developments stemming from the rise of artificial intelligence and biological technology. Toffler, a journalist turned social scientist whose predictions chiefly concern business mechanisms and social life, shares Esfandiary's feel-good themes (increased lifestyle diversity, self-managed medicine, wealth production and capitalism in outer space) and, like Kurzweil and others, supplements his writing and research with lectures, consultations, and appearances.

But even the humanist inventor Kurzweil—who has spent his life putting technology at the service of the blind, developing optical character recognition and speech-text interfaces, digital musical instruments, and the CCD scanner chip, and who believes that machines will achieve a spirituality similar to ours—concedes that people have a roughly fifty-fifty chance of a humane outcome alongside the super-intelligent robots and modified biological organisms of the future. It seems that, in this post-atomic and pre-AI era, there isn't a purely optimistic futurologist in the bunch; even the hopeful ones admit to the long odds.

Futurological speculation is a kind of static that surrounds us, like a thousand prophetic radio stations vying for clear reception on a crowded dial. And few people, futurologists included, generally live long enough to find out whether they were right. But with the passage of time, all those predictions must tend toward the more or less true: either resolving into clarity by bearing out, or fading into the fringe of lost ideas. Of course, looking backward, that scrim of conflict among prophecies might itself be the arc of cultural history. The future is arriving all the time; mostly it arrives without our knowing it.

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Sketch for Telemed  
Systems by F. M.  
Esfandiary

Perhaps Esfandiary's particular brand of prediction was rooted in his sense of displacement, or misplacement, in time. "My roots are in the 21st century," he wrote. "I have a deep nostalgia for the future." As he rushed forward through life, he was just getting closer to home. Alas, in the year 2000, while finishing a manuscript called *Countdown to Immortality*, Esfandiary succumbed to pancreatic cancer. His obituaries did not fail to note the irony, though the Up-Winger himself would not have found it interesting. (Irony is for pessimists.) His body was promptly vitrified in liquid nitrogen for long-term storage at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona, whose seminars and colloquia often featured him as a speaker.

One striking feature of the thousands of photographs in the F. M. Esfandiary archives is the meticulous labeling on every envelope of prints, detailing all the people and places recorded on that roll of film. Another is the parade of women, in various states of undress, who passed before his camera. His photographic archive documents an optimistic ego at work, amid a pitch-perfect landscape of luxury yachts, beach resorts, hotel ballrooms, and mountain lodges. Envelopes are marked by vacation: Morocco, Acapulco, the Hamptons, Vienna, Budapest, Kenya, Thailand, Hong Kong. Our protagonist, perpetually burly, hairy, barrel-chested, and lightly balding, appears in a yellow Speedo or blue swim trunks, always surrounded by women; or perhaps in a crisp button-down shirt with the top buttons proudly open, microphone in hand in some heavily curtained hotel conference room. His suave machismo seems never to have waned. No wonder he wanted to live forever!

By the mid-1980s, business was good, and he was working on new books, *Are You A Transhuman? Monitoring and Stimulating Your Personal Rate of Growth in a Rapidly Changing World*, which finally came out in 1989. But a key problem of his identity remained amiss, and perhaps he felt that a name change was by then as much a business decision as a personal one; he needed a name worthy of his franchise. It was a good time, finally, for a such a move—he wanted to "embark on new trajectories, new projects," as well as have his first series of books reprinted.

Though Esfandiary filed the paperwork in 1988, his notebooks reveal that as early as 1983 he had begun clipping articles related to the legal hurdles and social navigations of changing one's name. Noting that combinations of letters and numbers were increasing in notational currency, he clipped dozens of examples of what he imagined names would be like in the future. His restless scissors caught articles about U2, UB40, and the B-52s (musical groups); M-19 (Columbian leftist guerrillas); Cygnus X-1, Barnard 5, and Lynds 1642 (astronomical bodies); RS-232C (a computer serial connection); and the ER-200 (a high-speed Soviet railway car). He also took note when Cat Stevens officially became Yusuf Islam, as well as the strange case of Frederick Koch, wealthy eccentric and father of US Olympic skier Bill Koch, who legally changed his name to Coke-Is-It—apparently frustrated by the routine

mispronunciation of his last name as "kotch," rather than the more phonetically supple "coke." Despite the initial protests of the Coca-Cola Company, the change stood.

In his notebooks, he scripted mock interview questions and his charming, evasive answers, preparing himself for the media:

Q: What does FM stand for?

A: I haven't decided yet. Open. Let's say it stands for Optimism and Immortality.

Q: How does it stand for optimism and immortality?

A: I was never a good spender...

Q: How old are you?

A: Chronologically, in 50s. Biologically, in 30s.

Psychologically, ageless.

Q: Are you running away from something?

A: Yes, I am running away from obsolescence.

Q: Where are you from?

A: I am from the future.

But his notebooks also reveal a more authentic rationale, perhaps the final chapter in his lifelong efforts to grasp at who, precisely, he truly was: "Coin a name. A new name that best defines my ideals. My perceptions of who I am. Who I should like to be... I am infinitely ahead of where I was. I am gaining momentum. I am accelerating into the Future... I am a Futurist. Why not a name that is Futurist? I do not believe in the family. Why then a family name? I have no nationality. Why then a national name?" And so, taking stock of the clippings he had sourced for inspiration, he slowly worked out the combination. He considered FM\_84, FM 500, FM XI, FM + 1, FM Positive, FM 2121, FM 2020, and FM 2050 along the way. Finally, in about 1985, Feretidou M. Esfandiary settled on officially becoming FM-2030. It was a fine name. It contained both even and odd numbers, it represented a time well into the twenty-first century—indeed, the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth—and more than anything else, simply had a nice ring to it. In the margin of his yellow legal pad, he wrote, "2030 is a magical number because 2030 will be a magical time." Let us hope he was right.