

# Wanted: professional futurists

by Simon Ramo

*Dr. Ramo is vice chairman of the board of TRW, Inc. He has been an adviser to Government on trends and needs in science and technology for more than two decades.*

october 11, 1969

Certainly skepticism is a natural reaction to those who profess special gifts of prophesy on falls of civilizations, submerging of continents and the collapse of the universe on specific dates. Even business leaders who are often mindful of a need to deal with the future, shy away from too much planning ahead. They are concerned that such attempts commit them to theoretical paths to the future, whereas the real roads are of necessity obscured by countless unpredictable elements. Also, they fear that overemphasis on charting the future will lead to attempts to control it, to the dreaded "planned economy" and the destruction of individual initiative and free enterprise.

Political sophisticates prefer to be known as "pragmatists" ready to handle the existing situation, not the hypothetical future one. Economists teach that their work is concerned with analysis of forces and reactions, not prediction. Scientists declare that discoveries are, by definition, previously unknown.

And yet all these specialists cannot avoid dealing in the future. Businessmen must plan well ahead; economists have been forced to predict next year's gross national product; politicians watch polls with an eye to next year's elections, and even the purest of scientific researchers choose fields of endeavor in which they foresee the probability of major discoveries.

Every day we make decisions which are based in substantial part on the results of our continual, though often unrecognized, prediction effort. Since we are all engaged in anticipation of change as a practical necessity, we ought to give more attention to doing it right. We should seek to understand our prediction processes and develop superior ones, deliberately allocating some of our best thinking to such tasks.

Now what does doing it right mean? To begin with, it means sweeping away one broad and wrong generalization: the future is unpredictable.

If there is one overriding, scientifically based statement that we can make about the future it is that there is a close connection, rather than none, between the future and the past, between the established facts and the still unknown ones. What we have—whether it be scientific discoveries, technological advances, economic trends or the broadest of social change—is an enormous spectrum of future events with broadly varying probabilities of occurrence, with an equally varied degree of relationship with the past and the present, and with an even greater spread of knowledge on our part as to the relationships. Thus some events are predictable for all practical purposes.

The following steps can readily be set down as one orderly approach to the rise of prediction of technological advance: First, we can ask outstanding specialists in various fields to list their guesses as to major anticipated change possibilities for the future; second, we can order that lists of events as to importance to the society, probability of occurrence and estimated period of occurrence; third, for those events having strong combinations of estimated importance and high probability, we then seek to describe the potential social impact; fourth, we separate these possible consequences into good and bad; fifth, we set out to maximize the benefits and minimize the negatives.

As an example of how this process might have been put into practice, take the agricultural technology revolution earlier in the century. Knowledgeable people at that time could have met, deliberated and listed this set of likely possibilities: the need for far fewer people on the farms, the farm surplus problem, the shift to an urban population, farm price supports, minimum wage laws, unemployment and relief, etc.

Their key predictions would have been far from perfect as to timing and details. Yet they would have been valid enough that, had they been acted on wisely, decisively and early, the nation could have saved lives, souls and billions of dollars and our current plights of urban decay, environment pollution, transportation gluts, unemployment and crime and all the other by-products of chaotic, unconsidered change could have been minimized.

In a world in which technological change is accelerating and outstrips in pace a lagging social adjustment, it is no longer satisfactory merely to react to unforeseen developments. Instead of assuming there is something unsound about attempting to anticipate the future, quite the opposite reasoning should guide those who have to make decisions. It is scientific and professional to distinguish between the unforeseen and the unforeseeable and to seek to understand the relationships between the known and unknown, the past and the future, for the benefit of society.