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Future Schtick

Learning for Tomorrow: The Role of the Future in Education by Alvin Toffler

Review by: Richard J. Margolis

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# REVIEWS

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## Future Schtick

by Richard J. Margolis

*Learning for Tomorrow: The Role of the Future in Education* edited by Alvin Toffler. New York: Random House, 421 pages, \$10.

"I'm tired way into the future," Harriet Beecher Stowe is said to have complained—and that is how the reader may feel as he trudges through the sham paradise of futurism with nothing to guide him but a few empty slogans. Many of the essays in this ample compendium are useful, but nearly all are flawed by Future Schtick—the missionary peddling of shibboleths made fashionable by Toffler four years ago.

To cite a few beginnings from these eerily similar tracts: "All education springs from some image of the future" (Toffler). "Just as all education springs from some image of the future, all education produces some image of the future" (Benjamin D. Singer quoting Toffler). "The future is important to all of us, particularly since it is where we will spend the rest of our lives" (Harold G. Shane and June Grant Shane). "The future cannot be ignored in education" (Billy Rojas). And so on into the fast-falling futuristic night.

Even allowing for a tendency among academic writers to choose banal openers, surely we have a right to expect from these worthies more substance and less soufflé. No doubt it will be argued that "truths" such as these need constant restating because so few educa-

tors act on them. But few of us act on any of the great truths (e.g., money is the root of all evil), which is no justification for scholars and commentators to keep serving them up in the guise of elixirs. Besides, much of Future Schtick depends not on truth but on tautology, as can be shown by substituting either "past" or "present" for the "future" of these pious declarations: *The past cannot be ignored in education.... Just as all education springs from some image of the present, all education produces some image of the present.* Who would argue?

Still, some contributors have managed to rise above the humdrum occasion. Pauline B. Bart brilliantly explains "Why Women See the Future Differently from Men," analyzing the disparate messages we transmit to boys and girls. Among other telling examples, Bart quotes from a vocational text aimed at high school girls: "If you're interested in chemistry, you'll find it easier (and perhaps more satisfying) if you go into home economics rather than trying to break into the petroleum industry. If you want to take care of sick persons, it will be easier to become a nurse than a doctor. If you're interested in human welfare, it will be easier to become a social worker than a politician." As Bart observes, "Such consistent pressures, continually narrowing the girl's image of possible personal futures, inevitably has an effect on her intellectual capacities as well."

Another contributor, Philip Werdell, has written a long and convincing treatise on "Futurism and the Reform of Higher Education," in which he calls for a multiversity that will offer students more choices, give them greater power, and help put them in closer touch with both the community and their own feelings. It is an admirable vision admirably wrought, though marred in places by Werdell's naive acceptance of Future Schtick. He seems to think that the ideas he presents under the banner of futurism are new and experimental, when in fact most of them are simply restatements of notions Dewey introduced nearly 60 years ago in *Democracy and Education*.

But that is the common error in an otherwise helpful collection. No one has been willing to say he has seen the past and it works, which is why this book about tomorrow (and tomorrow and tomorrow) often creeps at a petty pace.

## The Politics of Research

*Politics, Science and Dread Disease, A Short History of United States Medical Research Policy* by Stephen P. Strickland. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 329 pages, \$9.95.

This book chronicles the shaping of American medical research policy from 1927 to 1971. Its focus is the phenomenal growth of the National Institutes of Health and their campus-based "empire," a complex President Johnson once labeled "a billion-dollar success story."

Strickland's well-documented history makes clear that NIH's success is measurable not only in scientific terms—in the uncovering of new knowledge and the progress made toward the conquest of disease—but in political terms as well. As domestic programs go, NIH has since its inception in 1930 led a virtually charmed existence. Whether the occupant of the White House has been a Republican or a Democrat, a proponent of big government or an advocate of laissez-faire, NIH has prospered. And in Congress some of the stoniest fiscal conservatives have led the fight to appropriate funds for NIH, often well beyond the level suggested by the President and the Office of Management and Budget. Indeed, Strickland points out that in marked contrast to the typical policy-making pattern, in which the President proposes and Congress disposes, much of the initiative and leadership of government support for health research over the past 45 years has come from Congress.

Indeed, the most disturbing power struggle the health research forces have yet faced has been an internal one, pitting the proponents of basic biological research (most NIH administrators and grantees as well as the scientific community at large) against the advocates of applied research who are oriented toward specific disease cures (the medical research lobby made up of concerned laymen, clinicians, and congressional health leaders).

While much of the initial congressional enthusiasm for federal funding of biomedical research was predicated on the naive belief that such support would in a short time lead to the eradication of cancer and other dread diseases, the scientific community immediately began an intensive educational campaign in