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Anticipating the Future

Barry Buzan, Gerald Segal

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"Where are we at the turn of the millennium? How did the world come to be as it is in the late twentieth century, and what do the stories of our past and present suggest about our future?

This ambitious book surveys the 20,000 years from the end of the last Ice Age to 7,000 AD. It is part history, part current events, and part science fiction. In contrast to the current mood of millennial pessimism we take an optimistic view of human history. What is truly important about our age only becomes apparent when we see the present both as a product of the past and as the maker of the future. To get this perspective, we take a long look back at our history and an equally long look back at our present from various turning points in the future. We argue that the human story, with all of its ups and downs, is basically one of progress, and that our time is a major turning point in this epic tale. We take issue with those who say we are seeing the 'decline of the West' or a looming 'clash of civilizations'. Too many millennial authors ignore evidence from the broader sweep of human history. In our age of micro- specialist, there is a pressing need to see the whole picture. If we are to get a clear view of where we are today, then we need the whole human story -- the last century or even the lost millennium will not do.

The foundation of this book is our belief in the capacity of human beings, both individually and collectively to learn. We still adhere to the now somewhat unfashionable view that on balance the unfolding of natural science has been and will continue to be a good thing, despite the many dangers that command of this knowledge generates for humankind. We marvel at the accomplishments and the prospects of chemistry, physics, biology, and engineering, and believe that they solve more problems than they create. We also have faith in social learning. While we might wish that collective human understanding about government, economy and society moved forward more swiftly, more systematically, and with less pain and suffering, we argue that, even here, human history has been basically progressive.

We see little reason to think that these lines of advance have somehow come to an end, and we anticipate that human civilization will continue to win the ceaseless race between learning and catastrophe."

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