

"The 90s--the Make or Break Decade"

A panel discussion

For the Hawaii Society of Corporate Planners
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The 90s are a moving hinge of history. We are in the midst of a transformation from an Industrial Society where economics, war, scarcity, and work are the main concerns of life, to a Post-Industrial Society where information, the environment, abundance, and service are the primary focus.

You yourselves are living examples of the hinge on which the future turns.

When I first knew the Hawaii Society for Corporate Planners in the early to mid 70s you were, well, for the most part, or at least in aspiration, corporate planners with at least one eye on the future and another on the boss.

Now I understand that most of you are MBA types focusing on markets, money, and the bottom line. Your time horizon, should you really decide to boldly gaze at the distant horizon, may be as much as--oh, maybe three months. You pride yourselves in your lack of concern about the future. Rather you stress your ability to adapt or to die; to sink or to swim; to deal or to wheel; to slam and to dunk anything the future might toss your way.

In the 70s, your predecessors fancied they could construct blueprints for railroad tracks upon which economic enterprises could chug safely into the future.

Now you are engaged in white water rafting down the rapids of change. While some of the people in the rafts seem to be wearing golden lifejackets, most of you are cheerfully up the creek without a paddle--though (thank God!) with your MBA.

Towards the end of the 70s, some of you came to realize that the light at the end of the tunnel was, in fact, the beam of an oncoming train and so you switched metaphors and jumped ship.

Now, as the topic of this panel well indicates, you are uncertain whether what lies ahead are yet more rapids; an ocean of opportunity; a treadmill to oblivion; or Indiana Jones and the waterfall of doom.

Let me put your minds at ease about the future. What lies ahead is this: A few more rapids, increasingly turbulent, then a mighty roaring waterfall, and then an ocean filled with ample monsters from the stilly deep as well as oodles of opportunity for the stout of heart and the facile of mind.

But first, a comment on the recent past.

The US, and Hawaii, and much of the so-called "developed" world, avoided the collision with the oncoming train in the late 70s by deftly abandoning long-held economic principles and deciding instead that credit and debt--not labor and cash--are what make the world go round; that it is good to steal from the future, forget the past, and "don't worry, be happy."

So, over the past decade, the US developed a dual economy. One, very, very large portion sector became a military welfare state, where young people became all they could be in the Army, and brains and industry were engaged, by virtue of truly impressive mountains of national debt, to invent, design, build, and then discard ever more complex, unworkable, and unnecessary weapons with which to ward off whatever evil might come our way.

Others were lured, through changes in taxes, regulatory laws, and new social philosophies which made greed into the great American virtue and civic duty, to engage in such obscene acts of unprecedented entrepreneurship and devotion to conspicuous overconsumption and nonproduction that Emperor Nero and his court seem penny-pinching puritans in comparison.

And so, here we are in the 90s. Ronald Reagan successfully killed the US federal government, as he promised. So whatever political action is able to exist must now take place at the local and the global levels. States, including, but certainly not uniquely, Hawaii, now have most of the governing responsibilities Americans once expected Uncle Sam to undertake on our behalf.

But, while we definitely have also created a nearly global economy in the past decade--and will complete the task over the present one--nothing approaching global governance is anywhere in sight. Hence, all the carping and complaining about the State being "anti-business." Hence the fact that corporate headquarters float around from locality to locality, like turds in a toilet bowl, seeking how best to exploit local land and labor, and then moving on when the bones are picked dry. (For further details, ask Hemmeter about Hawaii vs. other localities).

So, back to the future:

What lies ahead, I think, in this order, for Hawaii, and for the industrialized world, is this:

1. The Rapids. I said above that we created a two-tier economy in the 80s. I misspoke myself. We created a four-tier economy. The top two tiers are the ones I described above. The bottom two tiers are composed of people like myself and many others in Hawaii who still work in old-fashioned tax-supported jobs. In my case, there is no chance that my 4 year old son, for example, will ever have a job like mine. In fact, institutions like the University of Hawaii will not exist for him to have one at in his adult life time. And neither will those in the rest of the state bureaucracy. (Thank you for the standing ovation!)

But the bottom fourth of the economy of the 80s is growing faster than any other sector. And that is the permanently underemployed, the unemployed, and the unemployable. Your sons and daughters. And maybe even you, when the rapids get rougher as the waterfall looms.

2. The Waterfall is of course that of a global depression which will happen in the first quarter of this decade. While we in the US crow about the triumph of capitalism over communism, what is actually happening is that first the developing nations went over the waterfall in the early 80s, then the socialist nations went over in the late 80s, and now it is our turn to go over in the early 90s.

Happy sailing! Because the turbulence at the bottom of the waterfall will make the sounds from the recently-outlawed boom boxes seem like restful reminiscent music to

our ears when we hear the rattle of rifles and bloodied throats during the economic depression to come.

About those boom boxes for another minute. Tom Kaser's article in the Advertiser on St. Patrick's Day concluded with one car stereo installer saying this:

"The problem is not the sound itself but the venting of that sound. The guys who cruise through Waikiki and residential neighborhoods wouldn't be so unpopular if they'd keep their windows shut. But I suppose they want to make some sort of a statement."

Yes, I suppose they do. And that statement is: "You continue destroying my future in Hawaii with your obscenely selfish economic system, and I can tell you that while it may be boom boxes now, it will be boom boom later."

And then, after the waterfall and the rattles and boom?

3. The Ocean. Well, if we're lucky, then we will finally have that future I have been talking about for the past 20 years. The one in which addressing and redressing the various insults to mother nature, best known now as the Greenhouse Effects, occupy our time, instead of money marketing and managing; where robots and other artificial intelligences make and distribute all the goods and services everyone in the world could possibly want; and where a "service society" comes to mean a society of people who serve other people, who love other people, who help other people, who finally understand that it is only in service to others, not in greedy service to one's self, that meaning can be given to the meaninglessness of life.

That's why I agree that the 90s are the "make it or break it" decade. But I mean it is the decade in which humanity itself makes it or breaks it. It is the decade when we grow beyond wasting resources--our human resources most of all--either on preparing to kill other evil empires or on accumulating Volvos, Valium, and Vahallahs in Kahala, and learn instead to live in service to our neighbors, to our mother, Earth, and to the voices and intelligences urging us to leave our cradle and to live with them among the myriad of worlds among the stars.

So I end with the futurist's curse: "May your dreams come true!"