In this short essay I cannot hope to exhaust the spectrum of possibilities that lay between ourselves and the tricentennial. I have not said a word about intelligent machines. (But the best consensus of expert opinion is that we will have machines capable of scoring 150 or better on a standard IQ test before the end of this century—which is to say, machines as smart as a human genius, by the exact standards we use to measure human genius.) I have not touched on space exploration or colonization. (But Gerard K. O'Neill, at Princeton, has testified before congress on the feasibility of establishing space cities of a hundred thousand population or more at what is called the L5 point in the orbit of the moon.) I have only hinted at the bright hopes for new kinds of agriculture, and the almost certain disasters that is probably too late to avoid for some parts of the ecology. (Have we polluted at least part of our oceans past the point of no return? No one knows for sure, but some suspect it is so.)

So, at the end of this essay, let me confess the truth about predicting the future: it cannot be done, except in the most limited of ways, with any exactness, because the act of prediction itself can change the course of events. Predictions of excess population growth have turned out partly wrong, and part of the reason for that is that as people became aware of predictions they voluntarily limited the size of their families.

There is a more fundamental problem. As Dennis Gabor says, "You cannot predict the future. You can only invent it." It is not difficult to see what is possible, at least within limits. But to convert what is possible into what is real requires an act of will. We would not have landed a man on the Moon in the 1960s if it had not been for the fact that John F. Kennedy, shopping for a major event to mark what he hoped would be his second term in office, made the decision to allocate the resources to make it happen. The recipe for the future is one part inertia, one part opportunity and three parts decision. If enough individuals make the personal decision to conserve energy, we will conserve energy. If a large government makes the political decision to build Gerard O'Neill’s space colonies, we will have a city of human beings in orbit around the earth.

To speak about the tricentennial of the United States at all requires a certain act of faith. How do we know there will be a United States in the year 2076 AD?

I don't mean to suggest any particular disaster that might befall us as a nation (although I could think of half a dozen real possibilities in five minutes, if asked). But on actuarial grounds alone, the life-span of world powers is not very reassuring. We tend to think of our American nation as brash, puppyish, adolescent; but actually our country is already rather old, as world