

# The World in 2050: A Civil Perspective. “Grim Forecasts due to Rising Population amid Diminishing Resources”

Review of Laurence C. Smith's Book

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Theme: [Environment](#)

*The World in 2050 by Laurence C. Smith was published in 2010. I am reviewing it because the issues are so grappling during election year 2012.*

According to Dr. Smith, a University of California professor and geophysicist, the Earth is set on a warming trend, one that is long-term, irreversible, and accentuated by human activities. Smith's book is a “thought experiment” of projected scenarios under four major forces: demographics, resource demands, globalization, and climate change. There are troves of data and ideas on how these forces will essentially “push” human exploration northwards, even while the “pull” of social choices invite humanity to address micro- and macro-trends within their present habitats.

The “push” part of *The World in 2050* paints grim forecasts due to burgeoning southern populations amid diminishing resources based upon contemporary supply-demand trends. Not only is a new drought possible in place of the Great Plains, but rising oceans will threaten delta cities around the globe. With regard to potable water, decreased snowfall and depleted aquifers will place additional stresses upon existing rivers and reservoir systems. Advanced civil engineering developments (bundled within Smith's mysterious fifth force—the technology enigma) can help stay the dikes, and provide for desalinated drinking water.

Smith's depictions occur within the realm of glacial landscapes and geologic timeframes, compacted by recent technological innovations. Over-pumped drought basins can be peppered with green wind turbines feeding into energy grids; gleaming transnational canal systems flow out of water-rich frozen demesnes; melting permafrost can be assuaged by land-use agreements. Megacity consumers will dictate smart regional integrations which are both energy efficient and environmentally friendly.

Actually *The World in 2050* traipses carefully around potential environmental potholes. The professor all but admits that northern energy development companies, such as Athabasca Tar Sands, are messy, environmentally invasive, but hugely profitable. The northern frontier, Smith even allows himself to romance, can be compared with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Let us not forget how in under two short centuries, the once native picturesque plains, as described by historian Francis Parkman in *The Oregon Trail*, have become denuded of wild buffaloes and red-men.

America should not avariciously leech onto the resources of the Great North without due reflection and contrition over her excesses, even if the Pentagon allows for more wars,

terrorist insurgencies, and even Arab Springs to distract the populace. 2012 should be a time of thoughtful deliberation over courses of action; not indifferent proactive market speculations; not merely weathering congressional investigations over corruption charges. Otherwise the current course of increasing accelerated corporatization of once open, public New Deal federal work programs ensures that the common day laborers, and increasingly landless white collars, are to remain on their Trail of Tears.

Smith's researched "pull" tables and global maps of "pessimistic," "moderate," and "optimistic" century-long warming trends, which justify the projected growth and clout of Northern Rim Countries (NORCS), are as tantalizing as they are mind-boggling. Relatively affluent aging global middle-class citizens assure that not only geriatric services will thrive, but also NORC tourism, such as get-aways to Mongolia, Harbin, or Iceland. Longer, active lives can translate into extended working lives—provided there are adequate jobs and affordable health care. According to Laurence, however, the single biggest public health concern, whether due to climate change, shifting demographics, or globalization will be meeting the demand for clean water. Thus, Smith envisions that Northern Rim ports will expand, whether due to increased immigration, or natural resources trades including timber, metals, fish, oil, water, and even agricultural exports.

Dr. Smith's "pull" projections, although generously contextualized with socio-historical energy primers, leave some matter out for speculation. One noted weakness is that very little attention is paid to the potential of Antarctica and her southern rim countries. Another might conceivably be the underpinnings for the "thought experiment"; that is: 1) no silver-bullets; 2) no world war; 3) no hidden genies; 4) models are good enough. Without turning his thesis into Swiss cheese, one might conceive that these conditions are already occurring. Arguably, we have already entered an age of prolonged low-level nuclear war, aided by drones and unmanned submarines.

This book's publication preceded the Fukushima earthquake and unfolding nuclear disaster, itself the genie of an increasingly avaricious, unstable, globally competitive planet. Corporatization of the educational system, allowing for falsifying or hijacking research data, is unprecedented. The extent to which small genies may interfere with, warp, or leave unfulfilled the projections for futures speculators are blind spots which grassroots nonprofits, Occupiers, and dissident scholars will need to continue to battle.

One presumptive force in addition to the four major forces (demography, natural resources, globalization, and climate change) is technology, which Dr. Smith describes as entwining itself among the first four. Examples include global satellite networks, smart energy grids, nano- and bio-technologies. In fact, the power of the fifth force rightly constitutes libraries themselves. Imagine how far removed 2050 appears today as 2010 did in 1960!

Be this as it may, it is apparent that Laurence expresses the hope that human ingenuity in technologies will successfully overcome what simple environmental mandates have too often already failed to (albeit due to policy reversals). Political skeptics will not fail to notice that many existing environmental technologies (pollutant scrubbers, secondary and tertiary treatment technologies) continue to be dispensed with, lobbied against, and that the number of hazardous toxic waste (not to mention nuclear waste) dumps have actually increased over the past decades.

Are readers naïve enough to believe that the sobering projections of population increases,

coupled with water imbalances from global warming and diminishing natural resources, can be readily resolved via smart human engineering and strategic globalization? Even now, the upper echelons of academic aristocrats married to government officials have become elite institutions around which corporate planners flock to pay court.

Nevertheless, I find that *The World in 2050* is a must-read, an indispensable futuristic survival manual for engineers, scientists, planners, and thinkers. Whenever President Obama's 2011 Jobs Act and Transportation Bill does receive Congressional approval, it is hoped that this time around, a more public-spirited Committee of Oversight will be established to ensure that there are no more Solyndras, front-organizations, crony-capitalists, or other fancy ponies waiting in line to line their pockets. Instead, the Global Warming Oversight Committee will prioritize levee reconstructions (versus subsidized establishment of new global cities); balance national grange land reserves versus private windmill farms; provide tax breaks for scrubbing chemical pollutants versus supporting research for alternative processes; invest in desalination plants versus instigating international water haul agreements; decide how to deregulate energy companies versus bureaucratic incentives for energy savings.

Can the United States, the world leader, do all these things?

Maybe we have only to examine the past, the world in 1950, and clean, past presidential administrations, to see what is truly possible.

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