

Book Review: The Future, Declassified: Megatrends That Will Undo The World Unless We Take Action by Mathew Burrows

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In *The Future, Declassified*, the director of the Atlantic Council's Strategic Foresight Initiative, **Mathew Burrows**, expands on the most recent *Global Trends* report to detail some of the major shifts that will drive us to 2030. From urbanization to new technologies, Burrows feels that the US 'must take charge' or live at the mercy of such changes. **Gavin E. L. Hall** feels that the book is unashamedly American-centric, though does contribute some thought provoking ideas.

The Future, Declassified: Megatrends That Will Undo The World Unless We Take Action by Mathew Burrows. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

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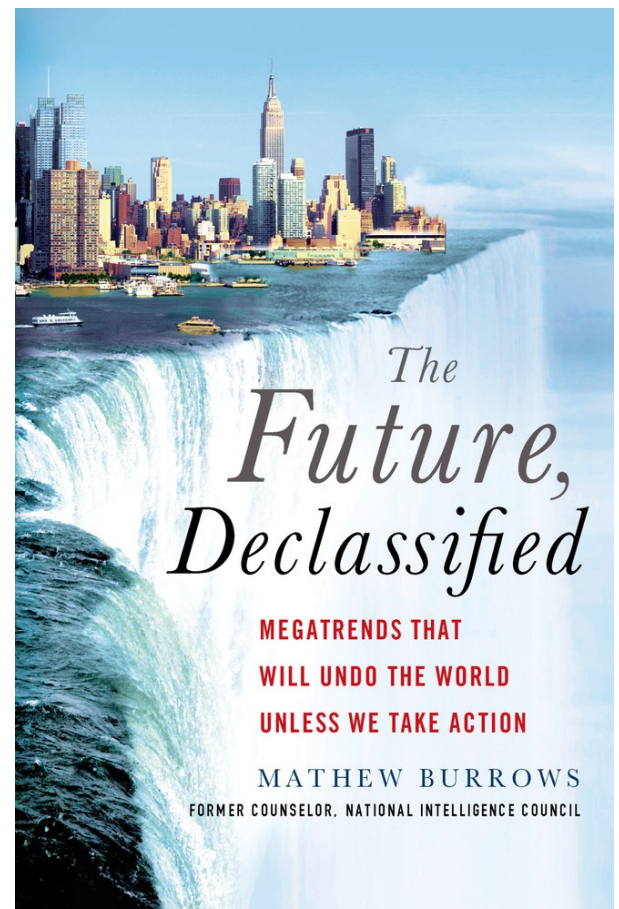
"We live in an era of profound change. The status quo is not an option." (p. 13)

The opening sentences of *The Future Declassified* set the tone for Matthew Burrows' argument and provide a neat summary of the core underpinnings of the text. However, the author does frequently point out that whilst some threats may occur as a result of this change – like climate warming and rapid urbanization – it is not yet time for the doomsayers to break open their champagne. The outcome of the timeless struggle between good and evil will be decided upon by how the world's righteous hegemon – the United States of America – responds to the challenges posed by this new world. And action is required now.

The book is essentially a presentation of the [Global Trends 2030 report](#) and is heavily geared towards influencing American policy. It appears that it also aims to bring the report findings to a wider audience in order to generate pressure for change by gaining traction. For maximum digestion, the book is split into three bite-sized parts: How the world is changing ("Megatrends"); what will affect the world in the future ("Game Changers"); and what could happen ("Alternative Worlds").

The most significant trend presented in "Megatrends" is the empowerment of individuals and the wide-ranging implications that can be enthused from such a notion. Though Burrows does posit that the implications for the state and security are not necessarily negative, he argues that the diffusion of power will alter our current understanding of national government and multilateral organisations, especially the United Nations. The likely beneficiaries of new power are Greek style city-states and regions. Think David Cameron's speech in the wake of the Scottish referendum stating his ambition "to empower our great cities".

In the second and third parts the focus shifts towards fictional 'what if' scenarios, which will no doubt have a popular audience amongst the hyperbole seekers. The central problem is that the United States has under-performed in the



post-Cold War era and has missed a number of opportunities by not planning adequately for the future. The significance of the structural changes taking place in the world could be better understood. Burrows states that the world has moved from the G7 in 1991 to the G20 today which is characterised by a growth in the overall number of the middle class, but represents a decline, in percentage terms, in the developed world of the global middle class population. The past has primarily involved the developed world as the main consumers of goods, i.e. spending money, whilst the goods being consumed have been built in the developing world. As the BRIC countries establish and grow their middle class, how will this affect the availability of resources and supplies in the developed world? Would prices go up due to increased demand? Would this result in a net decrease in wealth effectively making the middle class poorer?

The potential for solving these problems and the more important question as to how the United States can better manage its future planning are more elusive. The short-term nature of government planning is highlighted and one assumes that the electoral cycle must be a new phenomenon in American politics. Furthermore, the lack of vision and depth in planning is exacerbated by the increase in global competition. The worst scenario of all is the irreparable harm to global development from the United States losing its hegemonic position. This could be averted if the United States enhances its future planning and identifies the important role of technology in shaping our world, the 'megatrends'. This is not a new concept but a revisiting of Heidegger's assertion that 'the essence of technology is not technological'. In short, Burrows is arguing for a rebalancing of the subject/object relationship between human and machine.

When considering any form of analysis, a degree of scepticism on the quality of the argument being presented occurs when the participants feel it necessary to state their former affiliation. The implication is that you should listen to them for whom they are, not what they are saying, and thereby the argument being presented is not able to stand up to outside rigour. Although Burrows, former counsellor National Intelligence Council and director of analysis and production for the last decade, does fall into this category, as seems to be the trend in American intelligence circles, the quality of the book is not in fact undermined.

Although this book is unashamedly American-centric, the first part does have a significant place in the literature. It presents the core changes that are affecting how the globalised world is developing in our technological-driven era. It fulfils a similar function to Christopher Coker's *The Future of War* but perhaps on a broader geo-political scale. Though whether the core assumption that the world is better off with United States hegemony, as an innovative society that is central to democracy, is dubious at best, it remains hard to argue that the United States does not need to shift its thinking and approaches in this new technologically driven era.

The Future Declassified is an argument for leadership through this era of change. After all that is what great powers do.

Gavin E L Hall is a Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Political Science & International Studies at the University of Birmingham. He maintains an interest in future technology and warfare alongside broader international security questions. His main focus of research is the role of NATO in the provision of cyber-security. Previously Gavin obtained an MA in Terrorism, International Crime & Global Security from Coventry University and a BA in War Studies from King's College, London. You can follow him on twitter [@GavinELHall](https://twitter.com/GavinELHall).

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