



Book The Next Hundred Million

America in 2050

Joel Kotkin
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Recommendation

This is a refreshing book, even a reassuring one. Author Joel Kotkin describes a 2050 America deeply rooted in the present. Major societal changes will come about, and many are underway already, in signs as pervasive as telecommuting and as public as the face of President Barack Obama. Kotkin's future can seem a bit conservative, especially since he doesn't focus on radically negative futures (the impact of massive climate change, for instance) or technological change. His analysis remains grounded in observation, which renders his thoughts accessible and useful. *BooksInShort* recommends his forecast to futurists, to business leaders who need to envision their future workforce and marketplace, and to those interested in American culture.

Take-Aways

- While other developed nations age or suffer shrinking populations, the United States continues to grow.
- By 2050, the US population will be larger by 100 million people.
- These new Americans will revitalize the Midwestern "Heartland."
- More and more Americans will inhabit suburbs, not cities.
- The new suburbs will be culturally rich and integrated with their environment.
- Los Angeles and Houston, rather than east coast or European cities, will provide the models for urban growth.
- In 2050, a multiethnic America will nourish a "postethnic" society.
- Family will remain important, but family structure will vest in new, multiple iterations.
- Community will matter to 21st century Americans and emerge partially via the Internet.
- The United States must maintain growth and economic possibility for everyone.

Summary

What Will America Be Like with 400 Million People?

By 2050, America will be home to 400 million people or more. This crucial demographic defines America's future. President Barack Obama's election provides a potent symbol of the America to come: a diverse nation that blends technological innovation with "traditional values and social tolerance." While other nations' populations age, birthrates decrease and powers fade, the United States will remain young and vital. Many countries are crowded, but America still has "the world's largest, most productive expanse of arable land" to feed and house its new citizens.

"For all its problems, America remains, as the journalist John Gunther suggested over 60 years ago, 'lousy with greatness'."

The United States will continue to face challenges, but notions of the nation entering a period of decline are falsely pessimistic. Yes, China and India will rise economically, but the flexibility of America's business culture and society will allow the United States to maintain its economic lead. Notable change will affect a handful of areas: the nature of US cities and suburbs, the personality of the Midwestern "Heartland," the diversity of the "postethnic" population and the nature of US communities.

The Cities of 2050

As the American population grows, the dominant urban model must change. Older urban centers feature a dense central core. While many urbanists have dismissed “anti-cities” such as Houston and Los Angeles, which lack such a core, these metropolises will be 2050’s dominant “postindustrial” urban models. They will develop on new paths based on demographics, technology and Americans’ desire to live where they please. Instead of a single urban core, “a constellation of smaller subcenters” will serve these new cities – like their Los Angeles prototype, although LA’s subcenters evolved around specific industries, such as film (Hollywood) or science. Los Angeles may be a surprising model, given its often-criticized sprawl and certain historical events. However, LA weathered these challenges, and it will be the model of the future, defined by immigrants who will provide energy and innovation. This upcoming model lets people relocate easily as old sections of urban centers remake themselves and new sections emerge.

“America’s population growth will continue to change our lifeways, creating huge opportunities for new communities, goods and services.”

Postindustrial metropolises will parallel “preindustrial urban models,” wherein different districts flourished for different industries. New York, once the “aspirational archetype” for US urban centers, faces an array of forces aligning to displace it. The American “car culture” that celebrates and allows individual mobility still will be going strong in 2050. New York has little room for automobiles and is too expensive for the average person. Instead of a model for living, New York is the first “luxury city” in the United States. “Superstar” cities, like New York or Aspen, offer considerable attractions, but exorbitant local costs of living eliminate the middle class. Instead, such places house the wealthy, those who serve or entertain them, and the ambitious young, who live there for a limited time.

“Phoenix and Los Angeles epitomize the new urban model, wherein the downtown core plays a relatively minor role.”

The middle class will turn to centers like Atlanta or Houston, where their incomes have greater purchasing power. This exodus from the high-priced urban centers will multiply as populations abandon industrial areas, such as Cleveland, that suffer ongoing decline and decay.

Suburbs in 2050

Those who flee depressed urban situations will move to rising cities like Raleigh, North Carolina, and will join an ongoing shift to the suburbs. The suburbs were never as deadening, culture-free and isolationist as their critics claimed. That stereotype will be markedly untrue for the emerging suburbs, which will resemble an “archipelago of villages.”

“The ultimate issue determining the geography of growth is preference.”

Urban planners overlook the fact that people prefer not to live in densely populated areas, and especially not in housing projects or tenements. Some do, and others have been willing to put up with crowded living situations (and the accompanying traffic and crime) for access to urban financial, educational and cultural opportunities. But, in general, people seek less crowded situations, where they might have a house and a small patch of land. Owning property generates emotional investment, which nourishes suburbs into becoming vital communities.

“The suburbs of the future will be less reliant on cities and will provide more of their own jobs as well as cultural and religious institutions.”

At the turn of the 20th century, British town planner Ebenezer Howard envisioned an ideal “garden city,” where moderate populations (around 30,000) would cluster around employment centers surrounded by countryside. The suburbs of 2050 will approximate this ideal, and many are moving in that direction already. The Woodlands in Houston offers a glimpse of this future. It grew from a fairly standard suburban plan into an environmentally integrated community. Each population cluster has its own shops, growth is organized to preserve nature (28% of the Woodlands remains natural), and “135 miles of hike and bike trails” connect the settled areas. Following this model, the suburbs will emerge as “greenurbia”: suburban developments integrated with greenways and filled with low-energy, environmentally friendly homes.

“In coming decades the most critical challenge facing the nation will be maintaining the prospect of upward mobility.”

In the past, suburbs often were isolated by generation and race: only young, white, nuclear families lived there. This dynamic is already obsolete. “African-Americans have moved to the suburbs in huge numbers.” Previously, immigrants settled in urban settings and remained, often in culturally segregated ghettos. Two waves of immigrant populations are changing this trend. More established groups, such as Mexican-Americans, are relocating to the suburbs “for a new life and better conditions,” and almost 40% of new immigrants relocate directly to the suburbs. These new Americans are just another variation on the households found in suburbia, now home to single adults, multigenerational families and numerous “nonfamily” groups, such as singles living together. In 2050, these immigrants will work in decentralized employment clusters served by retail centers that understand their demand for community and by new cultural organizations. The new suburbs will offer the best of city life without the cost, the risk and the “commuter culture.”

The Heartland in 2050

In addition to new cities and new suburbs, the next hundred million Americans will live in a surprising place: “the American Heartland” – the middle of the continent. Several factors will drive this change. The heartland enjoys a surfeit of open areas, growth space the nation will need. Living in Nebraska or North Dakota will give these new Americans access to nature, long a part of the American Dream. This region offers rich farmland, and while the industrialization of farming means that “only 10% of people in rural areas live on farms,” the fertile ground makes agriculture an option. What’s more, specialty farming will offer a lucrative niche employment opportunity in the decades to come. Open rural spaces also provide fossil fuel as well as land to grow raw materials for biofuel – solutions for America’s energy future. The winds on the Great Plains alone could provide a considerable portion of the nation’s energy needs.

“As people live longer and produce offspring later, family ties are strengthening.”

Changes in the larger economy also enable a greater choice of places to live. Heavy industry clustered in Detroit and Pittsburgh because rivers and rail lines met there. As more of the nation’s economic life goes online, American manufacturers can set up their factories anywhere. As the culture gap between the United States’ heartland

and big cities decreases, people won't have to sacrifice access to arts and education for a life in a healthy community. Families can live in small-town middle America and have both. These rural areas are markedly less expensive than cities, so entrepreneurs can open businesses with more space and take less financial risk. This, in turn, makes these communities more economically vital.

America After Ethnicity

The pioneering African-American intellectual W. E. B. DuBois said “the problem of the color line” between whites and African-Americans would define the 20th century. Many signs indicate that the 21st century will be different. The election of Barack Obama symbolizes the nation’s “postethnic” future, which will suit its culture and free market. Immigrants to other countries often retain their distinct identities and languages, and remain isolated due to limited economic prospects. The jobless rate for immigrants to France (especially Islamic immigrants) is twice as high as for native French citizens. In contrast, Mexican immigrants to the United States have a lower unemployment rate than native-born Americans. Since Mexico and the United States share a border, some social thinkers worried that Mexican immigrants might retain a self-definition as Mexicans, and even reshape the border states into an extension of Mexico. The reality proves otherwise: Latinos increasingly self-define as American first and Latino second; their growing presence in the American military symbolizes their commitment.

“America is a country founded on and sustained by optimism.”

Many countries hamstringing their middle classes with excess regulation, and limit educational possibilities and entrepreneurial business growth. The United States actively recruits foreign talent for its businesses and schools. Once here, many stay, creating a steady flow of skills from other countries. Historically, many immigrant groups focus on specific regions and industries when they first arrive. Over time, though, they move out of their original industries and into the larger culture. This is happening with contemporary immigrant groups, but more quickly, mixing American cultures and ethnicities together. In the next few decades, expect an ongoing “hybridization” among “minorities and Anglos.” The result will be a nation of mixed races where culture and heritage will not limit any individual or group, and where everyone can engage in free market interactions that value possibility over past prejudice.

Community in 2050

Unified communities will remain important as America grows, but they won't necessarily follow familiar models. Many older communities grew organically, and faded or changed as people left. Communities will emerge in a more conscious fashion, and often the Internet will play an integral part. For example, a couple moved into Brooklyn's Ditmas Park neighborhood and wanted to contact other parents with young kids, so they restarted the old Flatbush Family Network, complete with a website to facilitate communication, schedule “play dates” and share information on everything from recipes to road work. This computerized networking augments face-to-face contact and functions somewhat like author Jane Jacobs's “eyes on the street” did in older neighborhoods. In addition to these new cybercommunities, Americans are moving less (some by choice and some due to economic pressure), producing a curiously settled 21st century.

“The America of 2050 may not stride the world like a hegemonic giant, but it will evolve into the one truly transcendent superpower in terms of society, technology and culture.”

Family remains central to America, but family life is taking on new shapes. People are living in unmarried pairs or groups. Homosexual couples share homes and raise kids. Many heterosexuals marry later in life. Adult children stay closer to home or even move back in with their parents. The war between generations that defined the 1960s is essentially over; contemporary generations are closer, share more of the same values and enjoy spending time together. When apart, they maintain intimacy via cellphones and social media tools. As the Internet enables more people to telecommute, home workers can spend more time with their families, producing something closer to a preindustrial model that blended work and family. This emphasis on family and home will strengthen neighborhood ties. Urban designers and retailers will recognize this trend and work to support it. These new families will retain the strong commitment to religion that has long been part of American values, but in a more fluid form. They won't hold to inherited religious values but will choose their own, or even assemble a set of practices from multiple traditions.

America in 2050

Many thinkers have predicted America's decline, or behaved as if it were already underway. However, the United States possesses a powerful capacity for self-renewal. It will face challenges and dark periods, but its demographics, diversity and “enormous physical assets” will fuel continual regeneration. Being concerned about the environment is legitimate, but economic growth is central to accommodating a burgeoning population and maintaining the American ideal of economic opportunity. Instead of choosing a path that denies expansion, 21st century America needs “innovative technologies and new ways of organizing work.” Class will be the defining challenge of the 21st century, as race was for the 20th. To address that challenge, America must maintain the possibility of “upward mobility” for everyone. This demands a reinvestment in the industrial core, led by government but supported by investors. Economic promise depends on energy, so the United States must radically reduce “its dependence on foreign energy sources” and rebuild its out-of-shape “energy infrastructure.” If America maintains its commitment to its unique identity, it will meet these challenges and remain a country “lousy with greatness.”

“The elements essential to forge a successful nation of four hundred million remain very much within our reach.”

About the Author

Joel Kotkin wrote six books, including *The City: A Global History*, and is a Distinguished Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University.
