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**HEADLINE:** Utopia lost;  
Fifty years ago, America's future was limitless. So what happened to optimism?

**BYLINE:** Andrew L. Yarrow, ANDREW L. YARROW'S "Visions of Abundance" will be published in 2007.

**BODY:**

AMERICA HAS never been richer, but it once was much more optimistic -- even utopian -- about its future.

In 1956, Fortune magazine published "The Fabulous Future," a book of essays by luminaries forecasting a nation of technological and economic wonders by 1980. Adlai Stevenson spoke of "the most extraordinary growth any nation or civilization has ever experienced." George Meany predicted "ever-rising" living standards. And David Sarnoff gushed, "There is no element of material progress we know today that will not seem from the vantage point of 1980 a fumbling prelude."

That same year, that wild utopian, Richard Nixon, then vice president in the Eisenhower administration, heralded a 30-hour, four-day workweek "in the not too distant future." Gallup polls found that only 3% of the population questioned whether the nation was enjoying "good times," and just 8% doubted that the good times would keep getting better indefinitely.

From the end of the Korean War to the peak of the Vietnam War, American media trumpeted a utopian future. A 1953 issue of Time predicted that a newborn would be twice as wealthy by her high school graduation and that a worker 100 years in the future would produce in seven hours what he now produced in 40. In 1954, Life magazine predicted a technotopia of jets, computers, color TVs, superhighways and doubled living standards by 1976. In 1959, Newsweek predicted that the 1960s would bring short workweeks, automatic highways and self-operating lawnmowers.

Most Americans and their leaders, from the Eisenhower administration to John Kennedy's top advisors to the chattering classes, which wrote such books as "The Challenge of Abundance," believed in a land of milk and honey from New York to L.A. JFK, who challenged us to land on the moon, also declared in his inaugural address that "man holds in his hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty."

According to the National Opinion Research Center, American happiness peaked between the mid-1960s and 1973. Today, nary a politician nor a public intellectual -- not even the cybergeeks -- dares predict soaring incomes, limitless leisure or technologies to make our lives pure bliss.

Studies show that happiness rises with incomes -- up to the point at which basic needs are met, after which it stagnates as aspirations also rise with income. The recent Nobel Prize-winning economist and psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls this a "hedonic treadmill." Like the proverbial rats, we run

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faster and faster -- and so do our aspirations -- but the bottom line is the old cliché: Money can't buy happiness.

Of course, Western Europeans and Japanese are gloomier than we are. But some of that starry-eyed optimism of late 1950s America can be seen today -- on the streets of Shanghai. Meanwhile, Americans find more happiness in marriages, relationships and children. But that fails to explain why we, as a nation, have lost the capacity to dream big. Why does no one talk about doubling living standards, 20-hour workweeks or silly but delightful gadgetry like the personal helicopters envisioned in the 1950s? Why have the Jetsons been succeeded by Homer Simpson?

Of course, one reason is that **utopia** has not come to pass. Many Americans have a harder time making ends meet; working hours are longer, reversing a 50-year decline; the cool new gadgets come with neuralgic 300-page manuals. But the other reason is the lack of what George Bush \o7pere\f7 so eloquently referred to as "the vision thing" in politicians who are busy with political catfights, tinkering at the policy margins or raising money.

"Utopianism" is often used as a pejorative, but our nation was built on -- and flourished on -- utopian dreams. We need them now more than ever.

**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: Nick Anderson Houston Chronicle

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