

What if 1950s Predictions of the Year 2000 Had Come True?

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Back in the mid 20th century, there was a wave of interest in what the world would be like by the year 2000. There were many different views on this question, and some hit the mark better than others. Overall, there were some very common themes, which included the following...

- *Atomic Everything*
Everything in the future was going to be nuclear powered: atomic power plants, cars, ships, spacecraft, airplanes, and so on. It was also proposed that nuclear power and radioactivity would be put to various bizarre uses, like employing nuclear detonations for heavy excavation projects.
- *Commonplace Space Travel*
In the future, people were supposed to be able to routinely visit destinations in space, and there would be a human presence on other celestial bodies.
- *Widespread Use of Rockets and Jets*
These were no longer going to be limited to spacecraft and airplanes, but we would also have rocket and jet-powered ground cars, flying cars, motorcycles, and jet packs.
- *Frivolous, Widespread Automation*
Everything in people's homes was going to be operated by push button: doors, drawers, cupboards, and everything else that had to open or move. People were also going to have home robots or at least some largely automated means of doing household tasks.

Almost all this was technically possible, but the reason it never happened was that, for the most part, it wasn't practical. Nuclear power is way too difficult, expensive, and dangerous to use all over the place. Flying cars are too hard to operate, too hard to control as far as traffic flow, too noisy, and present too many opportunities for things to go wrong. Rockets have a tendency to explode, and space travel never got cheap enough to be routine. In most cases, it makes no sense to use a complicated mechanism to open a cabinet or a drawer because it's a lot easier to just pull a handle. Nevertheless, this video will lay out an alternative path for the rest of the 20th century that ends with the 1950s' predictions for the year 2000 more or less coming true.

Nuclear Power

In this alternate timeline, the world avoided any major nuclear accidents that discouraged the use of nuclear power. Possibly, very early in the atomic age, there was a some kind of major accident that didn't affect the public but drove home to those in the field just how dangerous it could be, so better safety measures were taken from the outset. In our timeline, during the 1970s, interest in nuclear power was taking off in the United States as a result of the OPEC embargoes, but then the Three Mile Island disaster dealt the industry a major blow. However, in this timeline, it never happened, and so the United States brought a huge number of reactors on-line from that point forward. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, the Chernobyl disaster never happened, which in our timeline basically dealt a final blow to

nuclear power, but in this one, the USSR went on to complete all the reactors that were intended to make up the Chernobyl facility as well as building others across the country.

Nuclear power becoming more commonplace would also make it cheaper as techniques and components became more refined and standardized, and there would also be more benefit from economy of scale. Possibly, more advanced nuclear technology would come into widespread use, such as breeder reactors. Despite all this, there are still no canals dug out by hydrogen bombs or any kind of atomic cars in this timeline just because they're ridiculous. However, as nuclear power is used in military vessels, and since it is more generally accepted in the alternate timeline, we might see it used in some passenger and cargo vessels. Another effect would be more fossil fuels freed up from electricity generation, driving down their price and in turn making transportation cheaper. This would in turn result in more travel, trade, and economic activity in general.

The fact that nuclear power is more widely used means there are more opportunities for an accident. There may be more safety-consciousness in this timeline, but complacency might develop too after decades of not having a major accident. Notwithstanding the Fukushima disaster, we can imagine something like Chernobyl happening later on, maybe in the 2000s or 2010s. However, it would not affect the use of nuclear power much because the world would be so dependent on it by then, the same way fossil fuel dependence prevents anyone in our timeline from doing much about global warming.

That issue, by the way, might not be as bad in this timeline, since people wouldn't be using as much coal to generate electricity, though again, they may be using more petroleum for transportation. Either way, however, there would be a much bigger nuclear waste problem, and the Yucca Mountain repository, which was basically scrapped in our timeline, would probably wind up opening. Another dark side to this timeline besides the waste issue is that because nuclear technology would be more widespread and acceptable, there would probably be more nuclear proliferation and thus a greater risk of nuclear war.

Finally, we would probably see more human settlement of inhospitable places on Earth, such as the Arctic, Antarctica, and the oceans because having access to the abundant, steady power of a nuclear reactor would make it more practical. This would be even more the case for the space program. A better public perception of nuclear power might see it used more in space, which could make it more practical to power spacecraft and bases.

Space Travel

In our actual timeline, nothing drove the advancement of space technology like competition between the United States and Soviet Union. If we want to imagine a timeline where things went much further, we have to keep that competition going. The earlier achievements of the Soviet space program, such as the launch of Sputnik and the flight of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, were overseen by the rocket engineer Sergey Korolev. However, he died before the Soviets' lunar rocket, the N1, was completed, which was a significant setback to the program. In the alternate timeline, we can imagine that his health was more robust and that he survived. As a result, the Soviet lunar program succeeded, with cosmonauts setting foot on the Moon probably at some point after the United States' successful manned landing during Apollo 11 considering the greater resources at the disposal of the Americans. Though late, the Soviets still made it, just like the United States launched its first satellite after the Soviets. We

can also imagine the cosmonauts taking advantage of being second by doing a bit more than the astronauts on the Moon, like staying longer. As a result, there is still no winner of the Space Race.

Next, the United States immediately tries to do one better than the Soviets and says it will have a base operating on the Moon in five years. Both powers quickly start planning and ultimately succeed as both already have a proven capability to perform manned lunar operations. In the 80s, there is then a race to Mars. However, as in our timeline, the Soviet economy is in decay by that point, and the United States lands the first crew on the Red Planet, the Soviets turning their attention to space stations like they did after the Apollo program in our actual timeline. The Soviet Union still collapses in the 1990s, but instead of excessive military spending to compete with the U.S. arms buildup and Strategic Defense Initiative helping to push its economy over the edge, the space program does. While nuclear power helped provide the economic output to fuel space exploration, again, it also might have reduced the price of oil, which was one of the Soviets' major exports.

In this timeline, space travel is still not as commonplace as imagined in the 1950s, but it is more common than in our timeline. With space technology advancing faster, we might have seen a company like Bigelow Aerospace, Virgin Galactic, or SpaceX emerge much earlier. With various companies claiming in our timeline that they will offer passenger service or space hotels in the 2020s or 2030s, perhaps they would have been up and running by the alternate 2000. Having reached the point of operating a moon base or going to Mars, space travel is cheaper than in our timeline, though it's unlikely to have gotten cheap enough that people can treat going to an orbital hotel like going to the Grand Canyon.

Jets and Rockets

The more advanced space programs would also lead to a more advanced aerospace industry. While in our timeline, the Concorde and the Soviet-equivalent Tupolev Tu-144 had both terminated service by the early 2000s, in the alternate timeline, it's likely supersonic passenger travel would have been well-established. It also could have been more economical to run because of potentially lower oil prices. For practical reasons, however, it's still too big a leap to say there would be flying cars or that people would be driving cars powered by jets or rockets, but there might be some kind of exotic, niche aviation, like some kind of small aircraft shuttling business executives from point to point within a city.

Automation

As for a path to the kind of automation envisioned in the 50s, we can look to fashion. Consider portable electronics in our timeline. It's pointless to make a cell phone any thinner than thin enough to fit in a pocket because then it just becomes more expensive, harder to manufacture, harder to repair, less durable, and leaves less room for actual features with no additional benefit. But largely the result of Apple's marketing strategy, it's considered fashionable, so that's what we have. Similarly, we can imagine that in the alternate timeline, automatically opening devices are everywhere because some trendy company marketed that concept outstandingly well. It's still not practical but caught on and became the fashion. The same way people in our timeline want to get the next iPhone because Apple managed to shave off another millimeter, in the alternate timeline, they want to get the latest, most outlandish closet door opener. Such a fashion could also be encouraged by the Space Age getting stretched out along with all its connotations of speed and motion.

For the same reason, home robots and the like might be desirable enough as status symbols that people pay a lot of money for them even though they don't work very well. The same way they impress their friends by getting a pointlessly big TV in our actual timeline, they get an expensive robot that can open the refrigerator and get a can of soda, some of the time. If the demand is there, some company will fill it. In addition, robots and automation may be better than in our timeline, since they're very useful in space and thus were spurred by the longer Space Race, but they probably wouldn't be as good as what people imagined in the 1950s just because of technological realities.

When looking back, there probably were conceivable ways to arrive at something at least close to the future imagined in the 1950s. One thing to remember though is that future predictions often more represent the dreams, values, and fads of the people making them rather than what is the most likely outcome. As in the case of the predictions of the 50s, practicality largely won out over optimism. However, there's no saying for sure what might be possible over the coming decades.