By F. M. Esfandiary

The world is moving toward an age of limitless abundance—abundant energy, food, raw materials. Decades from now this late 20th century will be remembered as a period in which the world shifted from age-old scarcity to a new era of plenty.

Paradoxically in the United States today there is growing concern that we are depleting our “finite” resources. Books and articles appear every day with cataclysmic titles: “The Coming Dark Age,” “Limits to Growth,” “The End of Affluence,” “The End of the Consumer Society.”

Such doomsday exaggerations are by now a familiar pattern, particularly in the United States.

What are the new sources of energy, the new methods of food production, the new accessibility of limitless raw materials?

ENERGY

Solar power, nuclear fusion, geothermal energy, recycled energy, wind energy, hydrogen fuel—these sources will soon provide cheap, nonpolluting limitless energy, enough to last for millions of years.

Small-scale application of solar energy has already begun. Widespread solar electrification and commercial application of nuclear fusion are expected in the 1980’s. Scientists are also excitedly projecting a bountiful “hydrogen economy.”

New technologies are increasingly mobilized in the development of energy. Computers and lasers are helping develop solar energy and nuclear fusion. Earth-orbiting satellites have located geothermal sites in Arizona, Central America and East Asia.

FOOD

Agriculture is undergoing an epochal revolution. We are evolving from feudal and industrial agriculture to cybernated food production. Computers, remote control cultivators, television monitors, sensors, data banks can now automatically run thousands of acres of cultivated land. A couple of telearm operators can feed a million people.

Computers are also helping create a second Green Revolution. Through selective breeding, new crops are developed that need little or no fertilizers, grow in marshes, respond to saltwater irrigation, resist drought and disease, yield richer proteins. Such revolutionary crop engineering will help open up millions of acres of land that, for ages have been sterile.

Desalination units and sprawling greenhouses are already helping grow year-round vegetables and fruits in the hot arid deserts of the Arab emirates, Mexico and California. Earth-resource satellites are daily transmitting billions of bits of information crucial to food production.

RAW MATERIALS

We now have the capability to extract limitless raw materials from recycled wastes, rocks, the earth’s interiors, the ocean floors, space.

Vladimir Shatalov, chief of Soviet astronaut training, envisions atomic power stations in space, fueled by raw materials from the planets. “Would you say this is fantasy?” he asks. “But all space exploits come from fantasies.”

How absurd the American panic over scarcity when we are entering an age of abundance. How absurd to focus on “finiteness” at the period in evolution when our world is transcending finiteness, opening up the infinite resources of an infinite universe.

How outrageous that after centuries of privation and sacrifice leaders can come up with nothing more than yet more sacrifice. How short-sighted the exhortations to no-growth at precisely the time when we urgently need more and more growth—growth not within but beyond industrialism.

How retrogressive the preachings to lower living standards of the relatively rich to raise conditions of the poor, at a time when we can raise everyone’s living conditions by vigorously developing and spreading abundance, not sharing scarcity.

Let it be well understood that people around the world fester in scarcity not because we lack resources. But because we still squander billions of dollars on armaments. And because we fritter away more billions shoring up obsolete industrial technologies and resources.

For instance, why does the United States dissipate billions of dollars on offshore drilling for oil and on the Alaska pipeline yet invest only a piddling $50 million a year on solar energy and on nuclear fusion?

Why are most Communist countries bogged down in anachronistic agrarianism and manual labor when instead they could computerize their agriculture and economies to move ahead more vigorously?

Why do Asia, Africa and Latin America still squander billions of dollars importing automobile and truck factories, and building outdated schools, when instead they should rapidly shift to automated mass transit and satellite-linked teleeducation to quickly spread information on birth control, new agricultural techniques and so on?

This very day we have the post-industrial technology, the resources, the capital, the knowledge to flow to a new era of undreamed-of abundance.

F. M. Esfandiary teaches long-range planning at the New School for Social Research and is author of "Up-Wingers."