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Amconsul, SSo Paulo

November 23, 1969

Herman KAHN in SSo Paulo

Summary. Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute visited SSo Paulo from November 11 to 13 and proved beyond doubt that he takes himself far less seriously than the Paulistas take him. His visit, under the sponsorship of the Commercial Association of the State of SSo Paulo, was given a tremendous buildup in the local press. While most Paulistas took pains to discredit the projections of Brazil's future he had made in The Year 2000, newspapers did stress his impressive stature. One headline asked, "What Does the Fat Man of the Future Think Now About Brazil?" Another paper called him "145 kilos of genius!"

Paulistas had been hurt by Kahn's "pessimistic" view of Brazil's future, and they seized upon his admission that Brazil's GNP could be projected at 5.5 percent per annum instead of the 4.5 percent he had used previously. Kahn emphasized, however, that his study was really a broad-brush attempt to express some of the general parameters within which development could occur. Governor SODRE nonetheless announced that he did not agree with Kahn's conclusions and that he would fly Kahn by helicopter over SSo Paulo to "shew him that we will be a great nation even before the end of the 20th Century." That idea failed, not as some suggested because the helicopter could not lift 145 kilos of genius, but because Kahn slept through the flight. As Governor Sodr  later told an audience in the interior of the state, Kahn "slept so soundly that he was not able to see how dynamic and active the people of SSo Paulo are. He may be a great futurologist, but he is a pretty poor observer."

Comment: Kahn attracts both attention and resentment here not merely

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because he tinkers with Brazil's economic data. More fundamentally, his work implicitly calls into question the Brazilian dream itself. Brazilians have to believe that "Brazil is the country of the future," and if the dream is to be relevant it must be credible within a foreseeable period. Kahn's projections are just too modest to support the dream.

When asked if Latin America were not really run by the United States, Kahn said that our government could not have much direct influence over countries large enough to have a personality of their own. He said Americans' most important influence in Brazil was like their influence in Canada: "We overwhelm you with newspapers, magazines, and 'guest speakers'." His visit, replete with headlines and exclusive interviews in all the serious newspapers, TV coverage of his major speech, and several other television appearances, clearly had an impact. It was also clear that Herman Kahn continued to ask people to "think about the unthinkable."

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Comments: ... here not merely

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