

FOREWORD

This is the fiction version of my essay **THE COMING DARK AGE** (Doubleday, 1973). I wrote this novel in 1973 and it was published in Italian - then translations were published in Spanish, German, Serbian. I translated it in English now.

Originally I had projected to 1993 the tragic events of the story. Fortunately no major catastrophe came to pass in that year. So now I am projecting to the year 2010 this imagined (or announced) major crisis of large technological systems in North America. (Of course I have updated many situations to take into account technological progress in the last quarter of the century).

I had begun to figure scenarios of doom after the big blackout which left with no electricity a few dozen million Americans in November 1965. There was another major blackout on the East coast in 1977. Since then American electrical engineers have learnt how to avoid these snags. In Europe major electricity blackouts hardly ever occurred. Why, then, do I continue to caution against the risks of a downfall of technological systems?

The reason is that congestion is always lurking in the background, ready to rear its ugly head and clobber modern society, should it fall in its ambush. Today the risk to be feared most concerns telecommunications. The whole sector is steered by computers. A glitch in one of the millions and millions lines of code on which we rely for our telematic services could spell disaster - for industrial controls, for air traffic, for Internet and Web, for E-commerce, for the management of private companies and public organizations. So let's beware! Even a novel may serve to bring to our consciousness serious issues. I hope you like this story and that this message of caution will not go unheeded.

Some film people showed an interest in the original Italian version of this novel. Some went so far as to have a screenplay written by no less than Dalton Trumbo - one of the best and more famous screenwriters. The film was never made and Trumbo died shortly afterwards. I have never seen his screenplay.

All characters in the novel are fictional and any resemblance to real life persons is due to random coincidence.

Rome, Italy - March 2000

PROLOGUE

On January 18, 2009 James Leroy Vernon was inaugurated as the forty-fifth President of the United States of America.

He had been elected with a landslide majority of 74% of the popular vote. For many years Americans had been uncertain, uneasy and shocked by the continuous challenges of ever changing hitech, of globalization and of financial ups and downs. Now, a new confidence had begun to pervade the nation. Two hundred and ninety million Americans were listening to the man they had brought to power. The man had talked renewal to his constituents - and he had an impressive record of success in public finance and administration, in improving the efficiency of the government machinery, in conceiving imaginative and bold solutions to international and domestic crises alike, in seeing that justice be brought to bear against the powerful and be used in support of the weak.

The voice of the President was broadcast throughout the nation in homes and by public address systems, wherever people were congregated. In factories - where production had been brought briefly to a standstill. impatient to resume a throbbing and accelerated rhythm. In trains and airplanes - which were weaving a maze of activity covering the whole continent. In State Capitols. In churches. In hospitals. In cocktail lounges.

"Today we do not want to rejoice for a partisan victory. We want to reaffirm to ourselves, to our children and grandchildren that we all pledge our allegiance to the United States of America, to the flag, to democracy and to unfettered development.

"I know that you all share now, or are going to share in the near future this faith and this sincere intention to set a new course for our country after a too long interlude of uncertainty.

"We are all together - sharing a firm will to take off, to mend our ways, to invent a new prosperous and stable future, having sworn the same solemn oath our ancestors wrote and signed more than two centuries ago. Let us give reality to the revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought.

"We should not just gape in wonder at scientific and technological progress. We should master it and blueprint its continuation.. We shall then colonize deep space and the deep seas, green again the deserts, eliminate plagues, war and injustice, cultivate the arts and civic virtues. We shall optimize the use of the land, the machinery of business, of

industry, of hitech, the quality of life and the quality of the living. We shall dig a new deep furrow in history - and start from that scratch."

Patients in hospital beds were sitting up. looking at the President's face on the TV screens and the will to live and to participate in the new effort flowed through their bodies.

"We will formulate and implement a new ideal of pragmatism and of achievement. Your fathers made two ears of wheat grow where one grew before. Your hands will make for the growth of dozens of ears, as well as untold gigabytes of information in myriads of more and more efficient microchips. We will establish a new tradition of integrity, a higher level of workmanship, a stricter standard of professional achievement in all trades and professions, a more modern performance of management, of planning and of inventiveness - reinterpreting the legacies of the old corporations and reinventing business as well as government itself."

"We will not be satisfied of achieving just a new deal or a greater society. We will redefine the very essence of associated life. We will take law and order for granted, but we will devise ways and means to ensure the coexistence of unprecedented growth and wealth for all our citizens, with stability, creativity, togetherness in a more robust - and a more gentle society as yet never even dreamt of in any corner of the earth."

On a building site in Illinois a crane operator listened to the President's words booming up to his control cabin two hundred feet above the ground from the loudspeaker, which minutes before had been beaming precise instructions about his work. He patted the familiar controls and sensed the strength of the machine with which he too was helping to make Chicago grow bigger.

In New York City engineers, foremen, blue-collar workers, hard-hats were standing side by side looking up at the huge structure taking shape as the Mile-Hi building. They all felt united. They felt the Presidential address was giving meaning to their work.

They felt intuitively but unerringly that the Mile-Hi Building towering over Manhattan and dwarfing the Empire State Building and the World Commercial Center - was going to become the first symbol of the Beautiful Society.

President Vernon continued:

"Our government will be called to set examples - our government will define new standards, new yardsticks against which we will benchmark our

performance. Americans must not - and will not tolerate autocratic paternalism, nor subservience to the interests of cliques and elites, which would deprive of well deserved affluence the weaker part of our society. Americans will strive for excellence and will set an example to the rest of the world."

"I am sure that you all who listen to me will follow the government of the United States marching towards growth, towards better management, towards the knowledge society, towards enhanced integrity and civilization."

Only a blade of sunshine faltered through the grey curtains in the room. The boys were not interested and they did not even have a radio anyway - but neighbors had turned TV sets full on and the Midwest voice of President Vernon carried easily through the thin walls. A joint passed slowly from hand to hand. The boys could not avoid listening to the voice. The boy who held the joint let it burn until it scorched his fingertips. He dropped the reefer to the floor and ground it in with his heel. Then he went to the window and drew the curtains letting a full blast of sunshine flood the room. He opened the window letting in the crisp, cool winter air.

They did not look at each other. They went out, as by common consent, feeling that they had to find different company, they had to look for new wider horizons.

President Vernon was concluding his address:

"The great, necessary and noble endeavor aimed at eliminating all the nuclear weapons arsenals in the world, which was started almost half a century ago, was never brought to completion. I commit myself firmly now to guarantee that the specter of thermonuclear war will never more endanger humankind and trouble the sleep of the just.

"We were asked repeatedly in recent years to believe in the advent of a new economy - guaranteeing unprecedented stability. The new economy did not come to pass - witness the great crash of five years ago. But now we may well trust that on a renewed basis of productivity and innovation, our republic will succeed in eliminating the maddening alternation of slumps and booms, which has plagued the world from time immemorial."

The President paused. Then he ended in a booming voice:

"We have two powerful allies: the American people and Almighty God. We have great faith in the people - and in God we trust".

As the band started playing the national anthem, the hand of the stockbroker shot out and he turned off the sound. The broker cradled in his palms his Web terminal and nodded repeatedly as he was scanning the little screen.

The signals were good and he started to dictate in a steady voice a long sequence of orders to buy.

America was on the move again.

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