Year of the Bible or Year of the Computer

Choose Your Poison

anon.

1983

While *Time* magazine was announcing the computer as its Man-of-the Year, Ronald Reagan, a former B-movie actor presently in command of the most sophisticated computerized system of annihilation in history, had something else in mind.

Calling Americans "hungry for a spiritual revival," the President decided to designate 1983 as the Year of the Bible, and told diplomats and politicians at a National Prayer Breakfast that "America will not go forward" without faith in God.

"Can we resolve to read, learn and try to heed the greatest message ever written—God's word and the Holy Bible?" Reagan asked. "Inside its pages lie all the answers to all the problems that man has ever known." *Time* editors, or even an agnostic computer programmer, could argue that the Bible wouldn't help to raise, Lazarus-like, some computer which is "down." But hard-core christians might counter that, just as Chinese pilots used to claim to use the wisdom of Mao Tse-Tung Thought to help fly their airplanes out of storms, computer experts might just find the scriptures beneficial in making some devilishly unruly computer terminal do as it is told.

So which is it? Do we get the former, archaic forms of oppression and self-abnegation—the Inquisition and the rack, the witch-burnings and the forced conversions of the heathen at the point of a sword, the hatred and mortification of the flesh, the guilt and the dread, the bullets blessed and the crusaders moving out of their trenches forward into the valley of death with god on their side?

Or do we get the new souped-up version, streamlined and automatic, blasé and horribly bored from shattering whole galaxies on the video screens, the constant surveillance, the conformism of the office and the shopping mall, the standardized computerspeak and the standardized lives reduced to the simplified, two-digit shape of the computer's ersatz discourse?

Will our children's eyes be glazed from the frenzy of the revival meeting or from staring into video games? Will we suffer the old forms of repression and conformism—if intolerable, at least "consoling" in their familiarity—or the new, frightening forms which loom on the horizon?

If anywhere, the U.S. is certainly the place for a "Year of the Bible"—a recent article in *Time's* idiot twin, *Newsweek*, observes that "the Bible, perhaps even more than the Constitution, is our founding document: the source of the powerful myth of the United States as a special, sacred nation, a people called by God to establish a model society..." Newsweek points out that in 1981, Americans spent $170 million on Bibles, and a million were distributed free to hospitals, hotels and motels.

The best selling book in U.S. publishing history is an apocalyptic, fundamentalist tract, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. "Only in America," writes the reporter, "is there a Bible belt with its interlocking networks of Bible camps, Bible colleges, Bible institutes and Bible bookstores." An article on missionaries in *Time* notes that some 38 thousand American missionaries are spreading their gospel throughout the world, much of the time among indigenous people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In fact, an entire ideology, a right-wing obscuran-

tist "Biblical Americanism"—two forms of putrefaction coupling in a bed of maggots—has emerged to contest the liberal, secular, Welfare State tradition of "progressive" capitalism.

But how can the poppycock of water-into-wine, no touching-no sin, angels and devils and heaven and hell compete with science, with kicks, with television, with the undeniable materiality of the modern technological world? As Marx wrote in his Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, "Is Achilles possible where there are powder and lead? Or is the Iliad at all possible in a time of the hand-operated or the later steam press?" And "Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and thus Greek mythology (and Christian mythology as well, we would add) possible in an age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs?"

In a word, yes. Capital represents a complex, unstable cultural equilibrium, whose fragmentary nature has in no way resolved any of the conflicts and the forms of oppression of the past archaic civilizations whence it grew, but rather has accumulated them, piled them up, contemporizing them. In the same way, modern technology, which would tend to shake free of the forms of private and bureaucratic capitalism and ancient state religion—being as they are so irrational and dysfunctional, they keep it from realizing its tendency towards a unitary system— cannot escape from the cultural baggage and the obsolete forms of misery and oppression which hold it back and threaten its further development. The "rationality" of modern civilization and technology cannot succeed because capital is essentially fragmentary and fragmentizing, which is why the nightmare of a converging superstate is so unlikely, even as a "resolution" to the problem of rival states and the nuclear arms race. What is more likely is more fragmentation, many small states, weird cultural and political syncretic accumulations and paradoxes; clerics like Khomeini with nuclear weapons and born-again christians wielding laser weapons. (One is reminded of the Baptist preacher who gained some notoriety last year for using behavior modification techniques to electric-shock disobedient children all in the name of the Holy Spirit.)

So it seems we are stuck with both. We're caught between the Scylla of the repressive christian state and the Charybdis of modern technological totalitarianism. Probably one of the most disquieting examples is Secretary of the Christian State Caspar ("the ghost") Weinberger, who in answer to a Harvard student's question whether he thought the world would come to an end as an act of god or of man and whether or not he was frightened of the prospect, answered quite seriously, "I have read the Book of Revelations and yes, I believe the world is going to end—by an act of God, I hope —but every day I think time is running out...I worry that we will not have enough time to get strong enough to prevent nuclear war. I think of World War II and how long it took to prepare for it, to convince people that rearmament for war was needed. I fear we will not be ready. I think time is running out. but I have faith."

Faith, indeed. One can imagine the B-52 pilots huddled together in prayer for victory—quite an irony that this christian civilization, in its battle against the "Forces of Evil," will bring about the very apocalypse which is foretold in its book. An irony for sure, but it doesn't leave the rest of us with, well, a prayer.

And to those sincere christians who are getting themselves arrested battering nose cones, who argue for a "true" christianity as against the one in power, let us remind them that all we have to go on is "real existing" christianity— that is, christianity as it has been historically expressed, not its earliest intent. In spite of their high intentions, it was this real existing christian civilization which their forerunners built on the ruins of Rome (and on the smoking remains of the villages and sacred grounds of the animist Americas, Africa and Oceania) which after all, led to the straits the world is in today. As John Mohawk has pointed out, "Christianity is an ideology of technology because the Christian message is that the pagan gods and spirits of the forests, mountains, streams and so forth are false gods and that streams and rivers aren't really sacred. Christianity paved the way for the philosophy that there is nothing wrong with taking an axe and a plow to the forest and reducing it to so much charcoal and so many acres of cropland." ("Technology is the Enemy," *Akwesasne Notes*, Winter 1979) And so Weinberger, and James Watt—who told a congressional subcommittee that "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns," and who claims to follow the scriptural admonition to "occupy the land until Jesus returns"—are not a travesty of christian religion, but its culmination.

Nevertheless, it was Reagan himself who outdid them all, telling an audience of evangelicals in Florida, while an orchestra played "Onward Christian Soldiers," that the Soviets are "the focus of evil in the modern world," and that "we are enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ to oppose it with all our might." One can only assume

that he would include (even relish) obliterating the earth to save it from the godless menace. Later, speaking to a group of high school students, he defended the technological revolution, and video games in particular, commenting, "Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing 'Space Invaders,' and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow's pilot," leaving no doubt as to how he planned to oppose the "focus of evil" which he decried.

Both components—the crusading zeal of "Biblical Americanism" and the mindless automatism of the video arcade—have become necessary to bring about the Armageddon for which the techno-christians so piously long. And Reagan, who somehow manages to articulate like few others the banality and the decomposition of the Anglo-American mind, intuits their interpenetration.

If we are going to find a way out and create a humane culture, we are going to have to overthrow the old forms of domination while somehow stopping even deadlier and more virulent forms from coming into being. Perhaps if we can nurture a faith in ourselves rather than in an authoritarian god or a technological arid scientistic universalism, we will have a chance.

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