

Chapter 15

Written in the Present Tense

This chapter is dated: June, 1966 . Since beginning the writing of this memoir 9 months ago , I've lived in 6 cities, a dozen residences and as many jobs. The introduction was written up in September. At that time I'd been living for several weeks in a barren room in the YMCA in Schenectady, NY. That a memoir such as this one would be written some day was inevitable, but when I began it I was simply bored, having nothing to do while waiting to be evicted because I had only enough rent money for two more nights and no prospects.

By mid-November however I'd made it to New York City , to begin a cycle of migration through homeless shelters and flophouses on the Lower East Side. As luck would have it ,I happened to be walking from the Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue when I was caught in the rain. The nearest coffee shop was at the corner of 42nd and Sixth. Walking through the door I ran into one of my old high school flames whom I've never known as anyone but Jackie. As a matter of course we sat down together in a booth and started talking about old times.

Although she enjoyed being regaled by a host of colorful anecdotes I confessed that I had nothing to show for my life. Jackie felt quite the opposite about herself, that she was on an upward track. After 3 years working as an usherette in the Triple-X -rated movie houses on 42nd Street, she'd acquired part ownership in

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several of the tattoo parlours on the strip of between 6th and 9th Avenues.

She'd never lost her affection for me, and I decided that the feeling was mutual, at least to the extent of accepting her offer to move into the guest room of her cozy apartment on the Upper West Side a few blocks north of 72nd Street. She'd seen to it that her living quarters were as far away from her place of business as possible while still being convenient in terms of public transportation.

Jackie really was a good friend. Besides giving me a place to stay she created a little part-time job for me which left me free time for thinking and writing . In exchange for room and board and \$35 a week I walked up and down 42nd Street encumbered with a sandwich board advertising her chain of tattoo parlours. Once in awhile I delivered small packages to addresses around the Greater New York area. Almost certainly narcotics ; but I was old enough by this time to recognize that one doesn't look a gift whore in the mouth. Ah ... that's not fair. Jackie wasn't a 'whore', not in the perjorative sense. She was ... well, she was what she was . What she still is, as far as I know.

Then on December 21, 1965, shortly before Christmas I ran into somebody I'd encountered occasionally around the Zelosophic U.

Mathematics Department in 1953. His name was Melvin Twinck. He'd abandoned his doctoral program in math to go into computer programming while the field was still young. In fact he'd begun working for Remington Rand at the time the first UNIVAC's were

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being invented just a stone's throw away, in the Moore School of Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. Now he ran his own computer consulting agency in an office building on 55th Street and 8th Avenue. Databytes, Inc. employed a dozen analysts, 30 programmers and twice as many secretaries.

Melvin Twinck was a self-made man; so he described himself at every opportunity. Stiff as a ramrod though overweight, with close-cropped black hair, he was always impeccably dressed in suits that made him look as if he were permanently in mourning. His manner was intense, as if he had something very important to communicate; complementing this was his tendency not to listen to anything people were saying to him. "Business before pleasure" was his favorite cliché, yet in fact his principal interest was neither business nor pleasure but his own existential Angst.

Twinck was naturally astonished to see me walking around New York City as a sandwich board man: it confirmed his belief, he said, that America wasn't really a democracy. After we loaded the sandwich board in the trunk of his car he drove us to an Uptown restaurant on Lexington Avenue, a stuffy place with undeniable class, clearly meant to impress me. I didn't know at first if he was just getting pleasure out of rubbing salt in my wounds, or actually intended to offer me something.

He did. Around 2:30 we left the restaurant and ditched the sandwich board in a side alley in back of Grand Central Station. Then we drove up 8th Avenue to his agency. The suites of Databytes, Inc. were spread over the 3 top floors of a sleek 50 story glass and concrete tubular shaft surrounded by Nothingness, a void

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that could have served to refute Descartes. Mel's benevolence was concurrently studied and authentic. Once comfortably seated in his private office he passed me a cigar. Then he outlined the kind of job he was proposing. Like a Shakespearean messenger of bad news, Twink apologized repeatedly for being unable to start me on a base salary higher than \$500 a week, that is to say, ten times what the sandwich board had been bringing me. But that was company policy, and even he couldn't go against the rules, even for an old friend. No job is perfect - I would have to forgo the great outdoors and encounters with fascinating people.

As he explained to me why I shouldn't be discouraged, he lowered his voice *sotto voce*, looking furtively to the door, fearful that an employee might be overhearing us. He promised to place me on a promotion track within a few weeks. By spring I ought to be earning \$50,000 a year, which is what he really thought I deserved. That was okay by me.

"I've never taken to the computer", I began, "but I'm sure that -" Twink stopped me in mid-phrase with a wave of the hand:

"Let me show you around." A cynical chuckle: "I'm giving you the grand tour." Mel got up, patted me on the shoulder as we stepped together out of his office into the long corridor. Rows of fluorescent tubes shedding an intense and flaky light drifted in military formation down its length. We turned to the right and walked down the corridor. In the first cubicle to the left 3 senior programmers sat huddled over a game of chess. In the one after that we spotted some secretaries and mathematicians playing bridge during what seemed an interminable coffee break. Finally

we arrived at a compartment somewhat larger than the others. The name 'Amos Mickey' stood strong and proud on a plaque above the doorknob.

"Don't bother to knock", Twinck whispered, "Just open the door a crack." My attempt to follow his instructions was blocked when the door hit an obstruction in the form of a pair of knees, themselves the summits of two hunched-up legs draped by dark tan tailor-made trousers. Placed obliquely on the floor directly beneath, lay the soles of their black leather shoes. It was not unreasonable to predict that one should find the rest of a body of some sort behind these knees and thighs, sprawled face-upwards on the floor.

Peering over the knees confirmed what had been derived through deduction. A pair of eyes embellished with heavy spectacles in a boyish face squinted upwards to a pair of hands which, with a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, were adjusting the circuitry under a broad table. Although a desk could be seen standing in one corner, this table occupied most of the quality space. Suddenly I discerned the goal of all this activity. The table was completely covered by an elaborate system of train tracks, long flowing unicursal curves intersecting in elaborate trefoils, multiple track relays and switching circuits, blinking signal lights, bridges, roads and tunnels, plastic grass and cows, even a system of small village stations between two grand city terminals. Trains whizzed by in all directions in obedience to computerized schedules, the complete gizmo operating under the management of

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a magnetic tape spinning between two spools on a home made GENIAC computer high up on a shelf on the wall.

Amos Mickey looked up just long enough to show me that he knew I was there. Seeing the director of Databytes Inc. standing beside me he waved, without any interruption of his handiwork. I closed the door and followed Twinck into the corridor.

"He's a toy train nut". he explained. Then he led me back into his office. "It's this way, Aleph", he began as we were both seated: "Computer programming is the last thing we do. You might describe it as the penultimate stage of operations at Databytes, Inc. Once in awhile we design some real software or run programs for our clients, and there may be days, no more than a few out of the year, when you find yourself working around the clock. It still leaves us time for the most creative, which, coincidentally, is also the most lucrative aspect of this business.

"Some people might get the impression that we sit around doing nothing at all. That would be a grave misconception. What we do mainly is THINK!" One could imagine him a publicist for IBM.

"What do you think about?"

"Government contracts."

I nodded, hastily and perhaps a bit too eagerly: "I understand. You're thinking about how to solve the problems stipulated in your government contracts."

"I don't mean that at all." He looked annoyed; it made me apprehensive. Something in his expression suggested to me that he was wondering if I were really intelligent enough to work for him:

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" I mean that we think of ways of *getting* government contracts! You see, Aleph, the government has a lot of money to throw around on military preparedness. *A staggering amount of money !*" he gasped , "*a truly staggering amount of money !* We'd mainly concerned with seeing that it goes to us and not to someone else. Our principal asset is *IMAGINATION !*" For some reason the word gave him the feeling that he ought to bang his fist on the table, and he did:

" The hardest work we do here is to convince the Air Force that some brainchild of ours, which will permit us to comfortably vegetate for a few years, is absolutely vital for national defense. Once in awhile the problems we think about really are interesting. When that happens you'll find us working really hard. Then everybody's happy." Twinck opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a thick sheaf of documents.

" Look these over in your spare time." As he reminisced he swiveled around and around in his armchair like a happy schoolboy:

" I started up in this racket with this project. It was suggested to me by some Air Force bureaucrat. Nowadays it's called let me see ... right *Problem-Solving Under Nuclear Attack : Pishah* for short. Aleph, psychologists have done some wonderful research on problem-solving aptitudes. We've combed the literature in this field over the last 20 years and discovered that no-one's bothered to ask himself about the strange things that could happen to problem-solving aptitudes under the stress of a nuclear bombardment!

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" Let me put it to you this way, Aleph: could you still continue to do your mathematics if you suddenly saw the outlines of a mushroom cloud rising in your living-room window? "

I reflected that for the past month the view from my living-room window had been restricted to a brick wall and a dank strip of pavement. Granted that this had little relevance to his hypothetical situation:

" Good question, isn't it? Well ..maybe yes; maybe no.. Nobody knows. *Until this very day* ", he chuckled, " *Still nobody knows!* I call that an MRC : *Maximally Remunerative Concept* " Twinck emphasized each syllable of the golden phrase by a jab of his left index finger in the air ,

" An MRC gives a maximal return for labor invested. The hardest work anyone's ever done on *Pisnah* has been in writing up the grant proposals that sell it to the Pentagon. Hell, man!: It's supported 6 families for a decade!

"Aleph, one of these days an A-bomb, even an H-bomb, *is* going to be dropped over New York City. It's not a hunch, it's a conclusion as certain as the sun coming up tomorrow morning. Personally, I don't think the Russians are going to do it. I anticipate a Civil War right here in this country." Twinck let out a sigh, or maybe a belch,

" You've got to look on the good side, Aleph: any kind of war means lots of data for *Pisnah* ! In fact, until there's a full-scale nuclear war on this planet, *Pisnah* will continue to be largely guesswork. You know, Aleph", he was becoming chummy again, perhaps too chummy,

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" I'd put you on the *Pisnah* payroll right now, except that I think you're capable of better things. I think that sharp mathematical mind of yours holds a dozen MRC 's , ideas that will make *Pisnah* look like a real pisser!" He followed this up with his first honest-to-goodness guffaw. Then he opened his desk drawer and conjured up a checkbook:

" Here's an advance on your first week's salary: \$300 . You can pay me back whenever you like, lets say starting a month from now. Actually I don't care if you take a year to pay up. By that time you ought to be making some real income. You can get this check cashed around the corner. Get yourself a decent place to live and a passable suit, and come back on Monday. *In the meantime study these documents.* Read them over carefully, several times if necessary : there's lots of wisdom in them. Keep in mind whom they've been written for and what they're really saying. "

Game theory, I thought: it's all game theory. I had nothing against the new job, if one could call it that , and I certainly needed the money. Melvin Twinck already filled me with loathing , but even under capitalism you're not required to love your boss.

Before leaving he took me to the Mail Room and gave me a demonstration his latest acquisition, a photocopy machine of which he was inordinately proud. He invited me to copy something ; I opened my wallet and took out one of Jackie's dollar bills. " Don't do that!", Twinck cried, a wild look in his eye , " Counterfeiting can get you 20 years !" We settled on an unclassified page from *Pisnah* .

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It was slightly after 4 when I left the premises of Databytes, Inc. The check cashing storefront was still open. I didn't need to eat anything more after Twinck's lavish luncheon, so I found a room in a hotel above 83rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. By 8:30 I was already in bed, sleeping the sleep of the self-righteous-don't-give-a-damn's for the next 24 hours. It didn't seem necessary to inform Jackie of my new situation in life. She knew how to take care of oneself much better than I did.

The job at Databytes, Inc. lasted 6 months. I wasn't fired; I had to quit. It was a question of psychic survival. Every day of my tenure there I'd felt my sanity slipping away from me just a little a bit more. Mel gave me the title of "Senior Mathematical Consultant". Having little to do I spent the better part of my days writing up this memoir. In my spare time I read through the *Pisnah* documents. Sometimes I pasted up news items in my Vietnamese War scrapbook.

Pisnah was fun. Every document after the introductory section was classified as either CONFIDENTIAL or TOP SECRET. Yet since they contained no conclusions or concrete suggestions we talked about them as much as we liked. The only part of *Pisnah* that anyone had done any work on was a bibliography on tape and printouts, summarizing all the research in mathematics that had come out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki since the war. Software providing statistical analyses for identifying *Bomb Induced Theorems*, or *Bomb Suppressed Theorems* were also being developed, though none of them had gone beyond the planning stages. It was part-and-parcel with the received wisdom at

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Databytes Inc. that real progress in *Pisnah* could not be made until an efficient Japanese-English translation program had been perfected.

No-one ever asked me what I was doing, nor was I under any pressure to produce results. Despite this one left the premises of Databytes, Inc. at the end of each day with the sense of emerging from an ordeal. This reasons for this were entirely a matter of the constant strain of coping with social relations. We might as well start with Amos Mickey.

Amos Mickey was in his early 30's, short and shapeless. Owing to the amount of nervous energy he exuded, he was not dumpy. He always wore suits a few sizes too large for him. Horn-rimmed glasses exaggerated his already large eyes. His smile, when not fixed, was distinctly manic. His air of fatuous enthusiasm was, unfortunately, all too sincere. He was scruffy and unkempt as well, though that describes all of us - saving only Mel Twinck, who kept himself groomed for business luncheons and interviews with clients.

I can't imagine that there's any exception to the rule that persons afflicted with monomania are always psychosis-inducing bores. Amos Mickey was not content to be holed up in his cubicle with his toy trains; he had a ravening need to bore as many people as he could with them. He had the advantage over the rest of us that we spent most of the day sitting around doing nothing. One afternoon we heard an explosion coming from his office. The noise stirred Databytes, Inc. out of its collective coma. A dozen of us rushed to his cubicle and threw open the door. There we found

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Mickey, stretched out face upwards on his floor beneath many yards of train tracks, wires and piles of rubbish. Putting it mildly he was delirious with happiness. Four of us put our arms around him and extracted him from the wreckage. Apart from some temporary confusion, he was uninjured. Somebody went to the kitchen to boil up a cup of coffee. While he sat drinking it he explained to us that we'd just been witnesses to the successful simulation of a commando operation in some hypothetical future war. He just knew that the Office of Naval Research could be persuaded to cough up another 25 grand for his efforts in protecting us from the Communist menace.

Sitting alone at my desk, doubled up in agony over the pages of this memoir, I labored to relive the extraordinary psychic suffering of my 7th year, or attempted to recapture that lost capacity for visualization of 4-dimensional reality; or, burrowing back into my store of memories engaged in the vain effort to retrieve the missing digits of the serial number on the incubator

.... when Amos Mickey, without prior notice or declaration of war, would invade my compartment, bubbling over with joy and impatience to show me the spring catalogue he'd just received from Lionel Trains. As he riffled the pages he proudly displayed all of its new gadgets. I had no choice but to listen. The only way to get rid of him was to pretend I shared his interests, hoping that he would be soon be seized by the urge to find another victim and go away. IF I recall correctly, I once saw an ad for a miniaturized commuter cocktail lounge cocktail shaker.

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One could not doubt that Santa Claus had never come down the chimney when Amos Mickey was a boy. One afternoon he took up two hours of my time - it may only have been an hour but it felt like much more - describing an ingenious program he'd manufactured. It allowed him to go outdoors and make a telephone call to a central switchboard into which he could dial up instructions to reschedule his trains to a new timetable. His jargon, swaddled in bales of information theory, communication theory, electrical engineering and computerese poured unchecked from his perfervid brain, clinging to all items in the room like the emulsification of quick-drying glue. A morning with Amos Mickey drained one more than a day's honest work, albeit there being no local standard for making the comparison.

Then there was Bob Smatters. He was a bulky, lumbering sort, a kind of perpetual schoolboy looking for some sort of purpose to relieve his futile woes. Although he wore very expensive shoes, their laces were always untied; he would have done better to wear sneakers. I don't remember him not wearing a green sweater, always the same. His smile was self-deprecating, something like a simper, but it wasn't friendly. Like the rest of us Smatters was bored. He was also a bore, the lethal combination. He might spend as much as half an hour moseying around in the corridors until he ended up in somebody's office. My turn came around with a fatal regularity. Once inside he would pull up a chair, hunch his large frame with his hands folded in his lap, and groan.

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For awhile that's all he did : little soft groans delivered with a timid air, as if apologizing for being in such misery. Between his sighs and groans he interspersed little tidbits of pointless information. A few innocuous remarks about Mozart's genius; then a groan. Some of the duller results of Homological Algebra, which he was studying at Columbia University at the time; another groan. Twenty minutes would pass in which he could be depended upon to throw out half a dozen trite and uninformed political opinions. For some reason he seemed to think that somewhat callous tone indicated the presence of shrewdness. Occasionally a deep sigh. This could go on until the morning coffee break; or the lunch break; or the afternoon coffee break; or closing time; or even after that . I've never met another person with so deeply rooted a spiritual malaise, yet with so little apparent reason for suffering from one.

Smatters was one of the Databytes old-timers, yet even about the company he never had anything remarkable to say. He might go on tediously about marriages, petty thefts, odd personalities, past feuds and squabbles, without arousing the slightest curiosity in his auditor. He and Mickey were two of a kind, and it should come as no surprise to relate that they made wide circles about one another. They were just a pair of cannibals looking for people to eat . Now that I'm out of harm's way I can feel sorry for them. I really do believe that enforced idleness brings out the very worst in all human beings. That and self-pity.

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By February I'd found myself an apartment in Hoboken. It took up the second floor of a rotting frame building and was situated above a saloon on a shabby street filled with bars for riff-raff and seafarers . It was only a few blocks away from the Stevens Institute of Technology;

when fed up with the noise and the drunken brawls coming up from below, I hopped over to Stevens for a bit of shop talk with the engineers. I was pleased with my new circumstances . They provided me with vicarious life experience without no sacrifice to my interests. There was a real danger at this stage in my life that I might become an alcoholic. It is fortunate that I don't seem to suffer from any genetic predisposition in that direction, because I quickly got into the habit of staying up until 4 o'clock in the morning drinking and socializing in the saloons. It became part of my regular routine to lie around in bed until noon or after .

None of the senior research analysts ever put in an appearance at the Database offices before 2 in the afternoon. I expected any day that I was going to be fired. The discovery that nothing I did made any difference increased my disrespect for the job. Only the secretaries were obliged to put regular hours, from 9 to 5, although they might end up spending most of the day in card games and gossip. Bob Smatters tended to wander into my office around 3, but he could usually be warded off for an hour or so by pointing out that, having just arrived, there was an enormous backlog of work I had to deal with that couldn't be neglected. To be fair although the official closing time of Databytes, Inc. was 5

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PM , the "creative staff", mathematicians, experienced programmers, operations research and game theory specialists worked at odd hours and its offices were always open. A nagging sense of guilt led me to stay on until 9 or even 11 at night, even when I had nothing to do. This meant frequent contact with Twinck who might show up around 8 PM and work through the night.

Melvin Twinck was a lonely man, one whose remarkable worldly success had been poisoned by a ubiquitous and unfocused guilty conscience. Perhaps because of this he always seemed to be in need of someone to listen to him talking to himself. If I was in my office when he showed up he sent me out to the local diner for coffee and donuts for the two of us. This little chore became an important ritual; it was one of the few things I did that gave me the feeling of earning my keep.

Work (even if there wasn't any) was now out of the question. On my return Mel would tell me to put away whatever I was doing ("It'll keep- another millennium or so!" , followed by a chuckle) , and go with him to his office on the 3rd floor. In an ordeal that could last as much as 2 hours, Twinck unloaded his cartloads of dire pronouncements,(backed up by reams of facts, figures and insider dope from the corridors of power) , of impending doom.

" *Aleph! Aleph! Aleph McNaughton Cantor!* " Twinck bellowed, holding his head as if wringing the last drop out of a sponge, "*We're all going to be killed!* " The sweat poured over the prominent veins pulsing in his denuded temples; all 30 of his

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overweight pounds trembled with fear. Sometimes he would grip a stack of pencils lying about on his desk and go through the motions of breaking them. Once in awhile he did break them:

" *We're-all-going- to-be-killed!* Do you have any inkling, Aleph - do you know *anything at all* about that pack of *maniacs* running the country ? Lyndon Baines Johnson! McNamara! Dean Rusk ! Curtis Lemay! Mendel Rivers! God forbid, Aleph: *there're not the worst!* I happen to know who are the most dangerous people in the world. Who do you think they are?"

Twick hovered over me, fists clenched, his stale unwholesome breath congealing like Jello over my cheeks. He returned to his chair and sat down before shouting:

" *The most dangerous conspiracy in today's world is the hierarchy of the Catholic Church ! Fathomless greed! ...Fathomless .. Cynical! Cunning !! Indifferent to the sufferings of millions - of billions! I doubt Aleph, that even your ingenious mathematical mind could begin to grasp the network of conspiracies intertwining them like the tentacles of an octopus with power-mad dictators, all the plutocrats, the crazed organizations, the fanatics, all the ... "* Twinck permitted himself a brief pause before he roared:

" *They're going to overpopulate us out of existence ! Aleph! Aleph! The fucking Kennedys ! Cardinal Spellman ! Madame Nhu ! Pope Paul !*" His voice was shaking,

" Keep your eye on *that* man ! Pope Paul! Behind that mild mannered humbug, that meek, cringing facade there crouches the soul of a Satan crueller, more tyrannical , more gluttoned by

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wickedness than Hitler and Stalin combined! *Overpopulation* !" That's their principal weapon. First overpopulate the world then starve it into submission. That's their grand plan. *They* don't have sex. *They* don't marry. *They* don't have children. But they order their flocks to use no contraceptives, tell them they'll all go to hell if they have an abortion, *and to have lots of children* !!

" When the bill comes in, when that flood of unfeedable mouths engulfs the planet, you'll find them sitting on their piles of hoarded food, high and dry ! Mass murder: that's what it is. *Simply the most stupendous, the most ingenious, the most hideous genocide ever imagined* !! "

Now I thought I understood why Bob Smatters groaned so much; I found myself doing the same thing. Alas, Mel wasn't finished:

" Then, my God! There's the Media! Madison Avenue ! And Show Business! Hell, man : LBJ is small fry! Peanuts! I'm not afraid of Johnson." Twinck beamed a rare radiant smile, proud to exhibit his courage in taking on Lyndon Johnson. Then something set him off again. He scowled:

" The day you see Samuel Goldwyn, or David Sarnoff, or Arthur Ochs Sulzberger walking into the headquarters of Databytes, Inc. , you know where you'll find me: crouching behind the door of my office with a shotgun, poised to kill! *Manipulators of public consciousness! Violators of the public trust!* Driving the lemming hordes over the cliffs, dragging the rest of us with them!! Just imagine it, Aleph! *Trampled to death by millions of brain-dead zombies* !! "

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His breast was heaving. For all his panting he might have been experiencing an orgasm. Yet still he hadn't finished:

" *Then there's pollution! Christ, Aleph: pollution!* " He lowered his head and wept hysterically, his pollution-saturated tears contaminating the surface of his desk, saturating his letter opener, the pictures of his wife, daughter and dog, the rock from the ruins of Hiroshima he used as a paper weight, his leather-bound copy of *The Biological Time Bomb* , his all-powerful checkbook, and a month-old copy of the Jehovah's Witness newspaper *The Lighthouse* that he'd taken from a little old lady who hung out at the corner of 6th Avenue and 57th Street. As he moaned, shudders ran through his heavy tub:

" Aleph! What're we going to do? What about our grandchildren? What kinds of spirochetes did I put into little Joanie when I made her? Making money, making money " Hysterically he began ripping up his ink blotter with his letter-opener:

" *Making money's the only thing left to do in this fucking world !!*"

More shameless bawling. I could no longer bear to look at him. Twinck appeared to not mind, not that he even noticed when I swiveled my chair about and stared at the wall. I was depressed, too, God damn it! Unfortunately the cause of my depressions was at close range. Perhaps I could at least occupy my mind and might stop my yawning by studying the texture of the bare cinderblock walls . It was, in fact, not unrelated to whatever I was supposed to be doing for Databytes: If a wall can look like that in its

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unfinished state, what might it look like after being hit by an A-bomb? For that matter what would the Parthenon, or St. Peter's or the Pyramids look like if A-bombs were dropped on them? Can we look forward to the day when cinderblock will be supplanted by a new form of matter called "incinerator block"? Why not speculate that Melvin Twinck might interest a foundation in buying up all the bones still lying about in the pits of Auschwitz and use them to building a war museum. A grisly thought...still, for someone like Twinck ... What would *that* look like after an A-bomb hit it?

And let's allow for the possibility that the nefarious scheme of the Catholic Church to overpopulate the world could backfire and we all started eating one another! *A ray of hope in the universal darkness* ! Melvin might also contemplate the hypothesis that overpopulation and pollution could eventually cancel one another out. Large-scale immigration from India and China may become necessary to counterbalance the depletion of the populations of the Western industrial countries by carbon dioxide emissions, carbon monoxide emissions, chlorine, nitrous oxide, strontium-90, uranium tailings, radon gas, lead and asbestos . On the other hand ... a new religion may take root and inspire 100,000,000 souls to take a vow of chastity ! Apparently the polar ice-caps are melting. I wondered if Melvin had read John Wyndham's novel, "*The Kraken Wakes* ?" If he had he knew that millions of intelligent marine creatures from Jupiter who are happiest living 5 miles below the surface of the ocean, had been arriving from outer space and threatened the future of the human race. Provided they existed ... And don't forget the pea-pods, and the body snatchers ...

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New York City! Now there's a scourge to outmatch the plagues rained upon the Pharoahs ! What's a manic-depressive like Melvin Twinck doing running a business in the most dangerous city in the world? What's keeping the Empire State Building from collapsing? The Hudson River from flooding the subways ? The CIA from dropping LSD into the coffee at Horn and Hardart's ? Drug pushers from hooking little Joanie? Even a sane human would think twice about living in New York

"WELL?!! " It was Twinck again. There was a grating edge to his voice. I turned back to face him. He was glaring at me with the unfocused rage of a drunk recalling an unpleasant childhood memory. His lips were curled in a snarl while his fists were clenched in a way that indicated he might just clobber me if I said the wrong thing:

"Well? Say something!"

" Who don't you move to New Zealand?"

" WHAT !! Aleph, have you gone mad? What have they got over there that we haven't got here? "

" That's the whole point; they've got nothing. Nothing ever happens in New Zealand. No overpopulation, no pollution. No culture, decadent or otherwise. After World War III it may be the only habitable place on earth." Twinck shook his head, the way one does with a complete idiot one decides to humor. He got up and walked about the room, grimacing if as he had a toothache and scratching behind his ears. His hands appeared to be making calculations in the air. Several minutes passed, and it appeared

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he'd made up his mind. He returned to his desk and began playing compulsively with the letter opener and paper clips:

"No. No good, Aleph. That's where they've got Zulus, or Hottentots. All those Polynesians are headhunters. Eat you alive if you're a white man."

"Maoris!" I said with some exasperation. "And they're civilized! They won't touch a hair of your head."

"*Civilized* ! Then they must all be Communists by now. Aleph, do you seriously want to send me to a place that's going to be another Vietnam in 10 years? "

I shut up after that , that is, as long as I continued working for him. It was usually between 10 and 11 PM when I finally succeeded in tearing myself out of Twinck's grasp. Then it was a matter of subways and trains to get back to Hoboken, there to drink myself blind in with Tom and Pee-Wee and Boots, and Mugsy the bartender, and a cute hooker named Angel, and Mike - never forget Mike ... until the merciful coma settled in between 4 and 6 in the morning.

If I happened to be in my office when Twinck showed up at Databytes, Inc. it was a foregone conclusion that I had to satisfy his insatiable craving for victims. However by April of 1966 I'd understood that neither he nor anybody else expected me to show up for work in the first place. None of *them* bothered to come in if they didn't feel like it. The most that was expected of us was to put in an appearance once every ten days or so with some kind of report, genuine or concocted, about our work in progress. That done, I fled: either to the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing

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Arts, or a neighborhood movie house, or a concert or lecture, perhaps a visit to colleagues at Columbia or NYU. I saw dozens of films, read lots of plays and listened to lots of music. This rapid and concentrated acculturation may or may not be apparent in my writing. For those who are interested, it was in this period that Chapters 9 through 12 were sketched.

The dive on the floor below mine in Hoboken was called The Old Pirate. It was there, in the beginning of April that I met Joe O'Hanlon. Joe was a retired ship's cook. When I met him he was eking out a precarious living from a dilapidated and not terribly scrupulous antique shop. When he wasn't tending the shop he was driving around the Hudson Valley picking up junk which, with a little paint and remedial carpentry, could be sold at ridiculous prices to yuppies as vintage antiques. It didn't make him rich; all of his spare cash went to finance The Old Pirate, where he hung out from early evening until late in the night.

Joe was as bright as I am, perhaps brighter. His education hadn't gone past the 6th grade. He'd circled the globe dozens of times, married then abandoned, or been abandoned by, 6 wives, and could get around in 4 languages in addition to his own brand of English. Joe had seen an incredible amount, in consequence of which he tended to assume that he always knew what was really worth knowing. Sometimes he was right. He was a non-stop talker but his stories were never dull. And though much of what he said didn't appear to make sense, it always sounded interesting and somehow apropos.

When he noticed me for the first time I was sitting alone at the bar. I must have appeared even more harassed and bedraggled than was normal for me. Joe got up from his table came over and sat down next to me. He put his arm around my shoulders and stared into my face. There was no mistaking the concern written on his features:

"Boy", he said, "You've got problems."

I lowered my face : "You're right. How can you tell?"

"Its all in your eyes." We walked over to his table. "Two doubles!" Mugsy, a slow-moving ex-Marine with half an ear and a mutilated mouth, put away his girlie magazine. Muttering something that sounded vaguely like "Skunks and boozers", he made up our drinks.

"Aleph", Joe began, "I've been around a lot. I've seen all kinds. I've seen your kind, too. Education don't frighten me. Pack of slimy bastards in them universities of yours. You can take the whole bleedin' lot of'em and stuff'em up yer arsehole!"

After such an introduction I happily allowed him to continue, for hours if he wished. He told me stories about classics scholars who'd gone to sea; about pallid and anemic bookworms whose every other word was 'this-ology' and 'that-ology', who after a year behind the mast could swear, drink and fight better than any three sea-dogs in existence. He described a pitiful runt who'd earned the name of "Terror of the High Seas" after a decade in Melanesia. He spoke of the men who'd shipped out to escape women, and of the others who'd done the same to find them. Like someone reciting an axiom in geometry, he asserted that one just wasn't a man until

he'd shipped out. Strangely, the gist of his narrative also suggested that the race of sailors was a vermin not worth the effort to crush underfoot. Immersed in this wealth of lurid and fascinating narratives I watched him, as one sights the arrival of an old friend visible from far away, work up towards the announcement of his basic thesis:

"Aleph, there's no hope for it. You've gotta ship out."

"Joe, I've just turned thirty. I'm a hopeless case, a washup."

"You washups is the best kind."

"I've never done any manual labor. The schools and doctors have made a mess of my brain. I let them do it, which shows that I'm just as bad as they are."

"Salt air, Aleph! That's the best psychiatry in the whole god-damned world. Now you take them psychiatrists: you can stuff the bloody lot of'em up my friggin' arse-hole!"

I dimly recall a fight that started around 2 in the morning, then a vague impression of my being hauled up the stairs and dumped into my bed. Awakening at noon came accompanied by a raging headache and aches in all my joints. Apart from a sausage-shaped welt on my forehead there were no other injuries. I threw myself into a cold shower, went into town for lunch, and made it to the suites of Databytes, Inc. by 4.

A secretary popped her head into my office to let me know they were expecting me in the upstairs Planning Room. Walking through the corridors to the elevator that would take me up to the next floor I was stunned to discover this habitual oasis of sloth transformed into a bustling beehive of activity. Entering the

Planning Room I found Melvin Twinck in conference with a team of analysts and programmers. The instant he saw me he dropped everything and hurried over to me, swearing a blue streak.

" Ah! At last! Here's the lousy bastard ! When in fucken hell have you been?" Not waiting for a reply he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away from the others into a private booth at the back of the room.

" Where the blazes have you been, Cantor? What the fuck do you think we pay you for around here?"

"Speaking truthfully, I .."

" Shut up! I'll tell you what we pay you for! Have you any idea of what's due to happen here in a week or so ? Do you know who's coming to see us? "

I could not resist a smart-ass remark about the sales representative for Lionel Trains. Twinck sat down in a huff:

" I ought to can you for that crack, Aleph! I ought to send you back to the sewer I dragged you out of. " His eyes leveled with mine as he steadied his voice to an even tone of menace:

*"Robert S. McNamara , that's who ! The Secretary of Defense , that's who ! Twinck screamed :"*And we haven't got a damn thing to show him ! We've got contracts with the Department of Defense lying around that are overdue 6 months! Hell! Half my staff is out on permanent vacation, with the other half jerking-off on company time! Oh-that's right - you haven't heard, you haven't heard ... It's like a Greek tragedy around here."

"Why? Can anything be worse?" - I found myself counting off on my fingers some of the things that could be worse than

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having to confront McNamara, - " Oh. no, nothing serious; I didn't want you to get upset . It's last week's news - stale stuff . But of course you weren't here. Don't feel guilty; nobody else was either. OK , whizz-kid : when we got the news about McNamara's impending visit I cleaned out all the crap on Amos Mickey's table and drove it to the city dump." Unaware that he was doing so , Twinck had started screaming again:

" When Amos came into his office and saw that his toy trains were gone , he drove his car to the George Washington Bridge and jumped into the Hudson River. *Mickey committed suicide !*"

I laughed. Twinck glared at me with hatred.

" I'm warning you, Cantor.", Twinck was dangerously close to jabbing his index finger in my eyes, " When I walk out this door I'm locking you in this room. You're not getting out until you produce some kind of report! Not just anything! It's got to be convincing! *It's got to be worth half a million dollars of our taxpayers' hard-earned money ! It's got to be worth the ransom of the Incas !*

" McNamara man- *Robert S. McNamara ! Mr. Vietnam!* Architect of the inferno consuming America's finest young men by the thousands! The man who, with a snap of his fingers, can invent 10,000 dead Vietnamese for his body counts ! Then go out and get drunk afterwards, for all he cares. He might be nuts, and the lousiest statistician of all times - *but he's not stupid !* Get that into your head, boychick. From now on, Aleph, it's sink or swim."

Together we went back to my office. As he closed the door and turned the key I was informed that 'Meals would be served

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every four hours.' My right foot collided with an unfamiliar object under my desk; I cried out in pain. Looking down to the floor my eyes encountered the outlines of a chamber pot.

Drafting the report took three entire days and most of the next afternoon. Typed single-space it comes to 50 pages. There are about a hundred equations, 10 graphs and 6 diagrams. The investment of Databytes, Inc. weighed in at 3 sci-fi magazines, 8 full meals, 5 sandwiches, 18 cups of coffee and two packs of cigarettes. Considering the amount of money at stake I came cheap. I quit in disgust because my report saved the company. Its contents can be more than adequately extrapolated from a few paragraphs chosen at random. Reproducing the whole thing would waste your time and mine.

All persons intending to read the next few pages are forewarned that this report is still classified Top Secret in the Pentagon archives. Anyone caught buying this book, or reading this section, or selling this book, or even publishing it, may be subject to prosecution under laws which carry penalties of up to 5 years in jail and/or \$18,000 fine.

<p style="text-align: center;">Project PSNA : Problem-Solving Under Nuclear Attack I. Sub-Project PSBNA: Problem-Solving Between Nuclear Attacks</p>

Mankind has always known war. There will always be wars. Wars are inevitable. Peace is only an interlude

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between two wars, even as space is just the name for a void between solid objects.

Nuclear war is but one of numerous modern alternatives in any inevitable war. An indirect argument shows that the existence of peace implies the absence of nuclear attack.

Problem solving goes on at all times, in peace or war. It is important however to note that problem solving in war is *not* coextensive with problem solving under nuclear attack, although they clearly share many of the same parameters. The study of problem-solving aptitudes, abilities and capacities has three parts :

- (1) Problem solving in war not under nuclear attack;
- (2) Problem solving in war under nuclear attack, and:
- (3) Problem solving in peacetime.

PSNA is concerned with the second of these ; PSBNA with the other two. Note that there is no active discipline known as "Problem solving in peace but under nuclear attack". Properly speaking it doesn't exist, which is why it has not been included in the above list. This fundamental asymmetry is vital to all of the conclusions of this report.

<p style="text-align: center;">PART I: Problem Solving in War though not under Nuclear Attack</p>
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It is in the nature of modern warfare that nuclear attack from or onto belligerents, originating in these belligerents or from powerful countries friendly to one or

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another of these belligerents, must always be considered a possibility. It is a safe assumption that the fear of a nuclear attack is always floating around somewhere in the mind of anyone solving or attempting to solve problems, simple or complex, in the context of every war since 1945.

Many problems which might otherwise be solved, have not been solved because of the potential threat of a nuclear attack. On the other hand one can make the argument that many problems which would not otherwise have be considered, have received consideration precisely because of the threat of a potential nuclear attack.

The following example has been designed to impress the reader with its cogency: *this report* . It is unthinkable that anyone would pay me to write something like this, now or in the near future, if there did not exist the real possibility of a nuclear attack. Let the record show however that I am not now under any perceived threat of a nuclear attack. This report is therefore a good example of the limitations to problem solving in war but not under nuclear attack for, at the present moment, April 3, 1966, we are at war. ¹

To give an example of how problem-solving during a modern war differs from the classical situation I evoke the account in *Plutarch's Lives* , of the death of Archimedes. Plutarch wrote that the greatest mathematician of

¹The above remarks apply equally well to articles such as this one written in times of peace.

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Antiquity, with the sword of a Roman centurion dangling above his neck, continued to meditate in complete tranquillity over the properties of the geometric forms he'd drawn in the sand . It is highly unlikely that even the great Archimedes maintain this high level of concentration with an A-bomb dangling over his head. *Classical equanimity does not accord well with the exigencies of the modern world.* Also we do not scratch triangles in sandboxes anymore.² Nowadays one would be more inclined to display a functional arc on the monitor of an oscilloscope. In a modern war there is the ever-present danger of an electrical power blackout. Oscilloscopes cannot function without electricity. This is an apt example of the issues pertaining to problem-solving in a modern war

Attempting to solve any kind of problem during a modern war can be compared to putting up a lightning rod during a thunderstorm. In a sense, once the storm has begun it is already too late to be thinking about putting up the lightning-rod. Without the lightning rod however you're left defenseless. You can't pretend you're not afraid of being struck by lightning while you're screwing in the lightning rod, because if that were the case you wouldn't be bothering with the lightning rod at all. If you let yourself be dominated by your fear you will slip off the

²Although I once knew a mathematician who took an Etch-A-Sketch toy with him into the bathroom of the Zelosopic Mathematics Department.

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roof. There is no way of knowing whether or not you will or will not be struck by lightning, and in all your efforts to defend yourself you merely increase the danger. This example splendidly illustrates the salient features of my basic thesis.

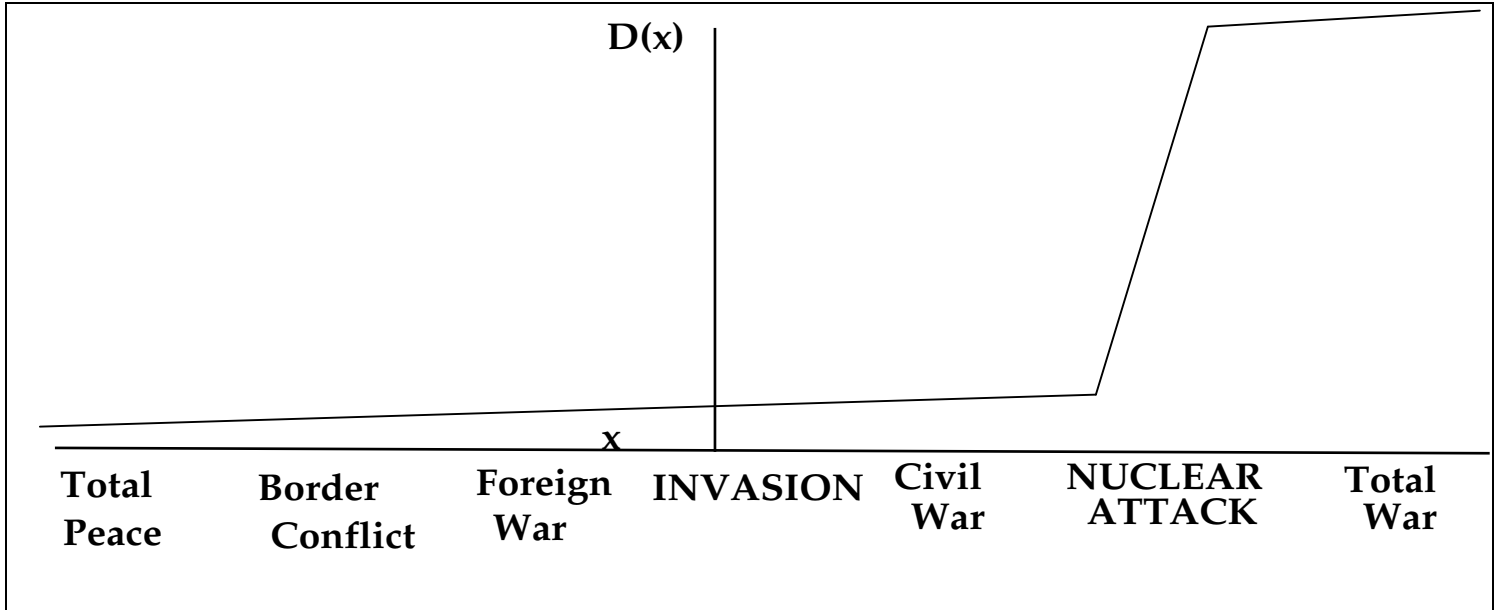
<p style="text-align: center;">Part II: Problem Solving in Peacetime</p>
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Since peace is a random fluctuation around the prevailing trend, that is to say war, it merits little more than a passing glance. It is important to note however that, just like the comparable situation of problem-solving in time of war, there are considerable differences between the modern and the classical situation. The clarification of such issues, and sundry matters related to them is the purpose of PSBNA Part II.

Let x be a variable quantifying, (from $-\infty$ to $+\infty$) , a range of options from Total Peace to Total War. In fact both extremes meet in a total cessation of activity. This is not our present concern.

Define $D(x)$ as the "measure of distraction", a quantitative measure of the obstruction of problem-solving aptitudes at differing values of x .

Roughly speaking, the graph of $y = D(x)$ looks like this:



The behavior of $D(x)$ as x goes to Total Peace or minus infinity, is the central concern of PSBNA Part II. Peace complicates normal life in many ways: leisure, boredom, idleness, adultery, jealousy, discontent, homicide, a rising crime rate, etc. As a compensating factor, more time is available for dealing with them. The 20th Century has seen a sharp upswing in research and development of effective technologies for the wasting of time. One can be fairly certain that the inauguration of the Age of Automation will generate many more.

To those who claim that war is obsolete I would remind them that on the contrary, war is just beginning, that eternal vigilance may or may not be the price of freedom, but that eternal vigilance always costs a hell of a lot.

Conclusions:

- (1) PSBNA is vital to national defense

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(2) PSBNA cannot continue without guaranteed government financing over the next decade.

(3) The cost of PSBNA is conservatively estimated as \$600,000 per year, not counting overhead and expenses, with annual adjustment for inflation, etc. "

The secretaries worked on overtime and through the weekend typing up my report. Twinck handed it over to Robert S McNamara, who delivered it personally to the Pentagon. Based on this report the funding for Databytes, Inc. was doubled. Melvin went before the Board of Directors to propose that I be given lifelong tenure in the corporation. One of the rare moments of true happiness in my life occurred when I handed in my resignation.

Another person who was pleased by my decision was Joe O'Hanlon. I had to stay up all night drinking with him in the Old Pirate . Although I now had over \$7,000 in the bank, he insisted on paying for all the drinks. I regained consciousness the next morning at around 11 lying in my bed with a black eye and a sprained ankle. Joe, grinning from ear to ear, sat by my bedside with a few of the Old Pirate regulars. Looking about the room I was shocked to discover that Joe had taken all of my books and either sold them or given them away . The money was used to bribe his connections. Within the week I had all my seaman's documents and a job as dishwasher and general deck-hand on a pleasure cruise circling the Bahamas.

This brings the narrative up to the present. When we pulled into the port of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands I jumped ship. Good riddance on both sides. I was the worst dishwasher in

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maritime history and took longer to swab a deck than the entire voyage from New York to the Caribbean. My bankbook will sustain me for quite some time. Coasting along on a vacation long overdue and blissfully indolent, I pass my afternoons placing the final touches on this memoir. The first draft should be ready in a month's time. Future plans include a trip to Europe. I've never been there. It should be fun, or so I tell myself, reinventing my alienation in a fresh new context. The joke is perhaps overdone.

That gotten out of the way, let us prepare, both readers and myself, to embark onto the most depressing interlude in the chronicle of my college education: the 3 years of graduate school.

