

## A TECHNO-CAROL \*

Our ten-term Member sleeps fitfully after a day busy in his counting-house. The election is, after all, nearly upon him. Consumed by the politics, he lies oblivious to the fruits of technology at office and home. Nevertheless, his electronically controlled blanket warms the winter's night. His quadrasonic stereo system soothes by whispered Brahmsian strains. The microprocessor of his home security system silently safes person and possessions. Sleep overtook as he pondered tomorrow's video teleconference with captains of industry poised to endorse his candidacy. Closeness of the count and overindulgence at last evening's fund raiser makes for a restlessness night.

He drifts back to his youth. While the new transistor radio blares, he applies the last coat of wax to his "wheels." They are endowed with power steering and brakes, antislip differential, pneumatic shocks, electric windows, and a day/night rear-view mirror from which dangles some icon of significance long forgot. He revels more in showing his technical sophistication than in the features themselves; forecasting imminent new inventions will outstrip these. He invariably squeezes the last ounce of computational power from the smaller-than-ever calculator swelling his pocket. He follows the race for space<sup>†</sup> as avidly as the pennant race. A true believer in unforeseeable developments of the future only anticipated in science fiction, he daydreams of creating new generations of miracles as an engineer or scientist. And the bedroom camera of his security system dutifully records a smile.

One REM cycle later, youth had passed. Reverie moves to the present. He sees himself, alas, not as technologist, but as legislator, forced there by insolvency in graduate school and provoked by politicians recognizing vote-getting potential. They told him his charisma was rooted in his willingness to look optimistically beyond present realities to future possibilities. But new passions had taken root. There he stands in Congress voting the party line. No to student loans. No to federal support of applied research. No to corporate welfare. No to pulling our own weight in international scientific collaborations. No to environmental protection. No, no, no... and each with perfectly plausible appeal to the proper role of government, the forces of the free market, self-reliance, and something about a missing peace dividend.

"None of those eager feeders tumbling against each other at the federal trough vote in my district," says he back in his counting room. "Let them complain about

mortgaging the future to their own member if they like." His bravest legislative aide retorted, "There are many things from which the Congressman might have derived good, if not votes." "Baloney! Hogwash!" said his honor with dissent-stifling certitude; "You don't think me ill-used when I cast a vote on the floor for no vote at the polls?" The bedroom camera of his security system dutifully records a satisfied, self-righteous countenance.

Another cycle come and gone. With morning not far off, a darkness, a pall, a chill engulfs his being. Is this a blight? An illness come in the night? Surely I'll be rescued by a miracle of modern medicine—one of those new inventions prolonging everyone's life—mine too, right? *I have consistently funded NIH!* "Oh stop sniveling and come with me" came the gravely emotionless voice of a dim lusterless effigy at the foot of his bed. The apparition bore a strange resemblance, right down to the computer, synthesized voice, to the telephone answering machine that had rested only moments ago on the nightstand. "I am the Ghost of Technology Yet to Come," it continued. "Come see what ye have wrought." (Ghosts can be overly dramatic at times.) Incredulous, our Member complains, "If this is some kind of Dickensian nightmare, three ghosts and a lot of self-revelations have been skipped." To which the visitation replies, "Your hearings afford only five minutes per witness. Tonight you too get short shrift."

The bed chamber faded and at once they stood at the center of an immense factory floor. Idled, dust-covered machines stretched to the horizon. "When is this place?" the Member asked. The mechanical spectre answered in a low-battery monotone, "We are beyond the Social Security and Medicare wars. Here debates over education, assault weapons, and free trade are all moot." "Then my policies are vindicated!" the Member exclaimed. "Indeed we cured all societal ills as we many times over promised we would. Self-reliance and market forces won out over mushrooming entitlements and the corporate dole. Why then have you brought us to this deserted place, this den of infamous resort? Where are all the beneficiaries of our wisdom?"

"They've gone selling their antiquated high-tech devices to pay the rent. Long since, before we lost the chip wars, before embargoed critical technologies, before the information highway skirted our puritanical shores, these behemoths produced goods and high-paying jobs. The rent was paid. Ours was the best technology and the best toys that short-term investment could

buy. But our warehouse of innovation came empty, and technological enervation ensued. Your prophetic market forces drove multinationals to more enlightened shores, drove the dollar to cents, and drove our best and brightest to greener fields."

And as it spoke, the rows of motionless machines transformed to rows of nearly motionless members in their hallowed chamber debating nothing of note. From the balconies hung the voting records of all members emeritus. Most prominent were those most calamitous. Our Member spied his own replete with the yeas and mostly nays more prominent than most. "Why is this desolation laid upon me so? Surely others led us stronger to this end," our Member lamented. "Your great potential, honorable sir, your instinctive understanding as a youth that sustainable development, a strong economy, and an enviable quality of life all require long-term, patient investment in the seeds of your technological miracles," it explained. "Shall we censure the unenlightened ideologues and all of their degree? No! Those who knowingly forsook the public trust to curry favor with instantly gratified voters, they must bear the blame. *You* could have saved us. Best you ponder how it was you lost your way." The whole scene passed off in the breath of the last word spoken, the apparition flickered out, and the bedroom camera of the security system dutifully records a grimace and a tear.

Morning found him as worn as when he retired. His answering machine lay undisturbed on the nightstand. He was alone in the security video with only his contorted lines to prove the night. Transformed that day, he promised the corporate captains R&E tax credits and lots of cost-shared R&D. At day's end from the well, he eloquently addressed all those obligations of governments—preserver-of-last-resort of future intellectual capital—concluding with, "No regrets can make amends for opportunities misused, but let us now dispel the shadows of low-tech that would have been." Snickers from the visitors' gallery, near where his abysmal record hung in the night, descended in a shower on the otherwise empty chamber. He knew that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter at the outset. Of course the election was lost and the last laugh died in committee.

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\* Some few lines paraphrase or parody "A Christmas Carol," Charles Dickens (1843).  
†That's outer space, not office space.