

Crazy Ideas [Editorial] Crazy Ideas [Editorial] Ben Bova ===== During the height of the American involvement in Vietnam, when President Lyndon Johnson had sent half a million American troops to South Vietnam and enough bombs were being dropped to make that whole nation resemble the bottom of a shake-and-bake bag, Senator Barry Goldwater reminded an audience of his ill-fated 1964 campaign. "Remember me?" he asked his listeners. "I'm the nut who wanted to send the Army into Southeast Asia and bomb Hanoi." Ideas that are first considered eccentric, unacceptable, or even crazy have a way of becoming commonplace, sooner or later. One of the causes of Future Shock is that nowadays, the crazy ideas become Standard Operating Procedure sooner, rather than later. Back when I was a lad (a sure sign of advancing, age, that phrase) nothing was crazier than wanting to fly to the MOON. Well, maybe there were a few things crazier than that: atomic power, death rays, artificial hearts, thinking machines, airplanes that could fly as fast as four hundred miles per hour. Now they're all as normal and as American as pizza pie. Science fiction, abounds with crazy ideas. Not too long ago, in Analog, Wade Curtis suggested that coastal cities could have plenty of fresh water practically free, if they would just arrange to have an iceberg towed to their shorelines. The average iceberg represents enough fresh water to last a fair-sized city for months. Crazy idea. But the US Army's Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory, in New Hampshire, in harness with the US Geological Survey's Ice Dynamics Project at the University of Puget Sound, Washington, has produced a report that shows maybe it isn't so crazy after all. The two authors of the study are Wilford F. Weeks, Army, and William J. Campbell, USGS. They concluded that a ship with approximately two-thirds the propulsive power of the carrier Enterprise could tow from Antarctica to Australia or southern South America an iceberg that would be big enough to irrigate six thousand square miles of land. Such an iceberg would be worth more than one billion dollars. The cost of water from a large, modern desalination plant is estimated to be about 19 cents per cubic meter (264.2 gallons). The price of fresh water from the melting iceberg would be 0.8 cents, they calculated. Crazy idea. And, of course, it is only in science-fiction stories that you find spacecraft that go faster than light, that utilize crazy things like space warps to get around the light-speed barrier. It's also the science-fiction "nuts" who talk about alternate universes and other dimensions of space/time as if they really existed. ===== Well now... astrophysicists have gone ga-ga over black holes, the potholes in space left when very massive stars or whole galaxies collapse. Theorists have speculated that the collapsing star might actually dig a "wormhole" through space/time and emerge else-where/elsewhen in the universe as a white hole—and perhaps that's what the quasars are. Sounds suspiciously like a space warp to me! Those wormhole tunnels might be just the thing for starships to use as shortcuts from one part of the universe to another. And, in fact, we've already had science-fiction stories in which "collapsar" space warps are purposely made by human scientists and engineers, who can't poke around looking for natural wormholes when they're in a hurry to take a shortcut to Betelgeuse. And the theoretiker physicists are also muttering to each other, not about the possibility of alternate universes, but about the absolute necessity of postulating them, in order to save the foundations of physical theory! Seems that the uncertainty principles of modern physics lead to an unpleasant paradox. Theoretical considerations tell us that for any given decision-point in the universe—say, whether or not you'll blink your eyes before you finish this phrase—there's a fifty-fifty chance for the decision to go either way. Yet in our real world, you either go a hundred percent one way or a hundred percent the other. You either blink your eyes or you don't. There must be, the theoreticians conclude, a universe in which the other decision holds true. For every decision-point in this universe, there is an alternate universe in which the decision went the other way. There must be googols of universes! Some exactly like ours, right up

until a moment ago; others that branched off ages ago, when the dinosaurs became intelligent (for example). Crazy. The stuff of science fiction. Except that it's been discussed in the highest circles of theoretical physics. Science-fiction writers come up with all sorts of weird ideas. Many of them—such as the negative income tax—they borrow from the “straight” world. Others, such as an international struggle over the natural resources of the oceans, they make up out of whole cloth—only to have the “straight” world borrow it from them. One science-fiction idea that seems definitely on its way to reality is the universal credit card, and the eventual elimination of cash money. However, anyone who's tried to argue with a computer-smug credit card organization can testify that the day of the credit-card-economy won't dawn until both the machines and the people get a lot smarter. It's chilling to hear a pleasant-voiced young lady ask, over the phone, for your card number so that she can check out the discrepancy in your bill that you're complaining about, and then have her come back saying, “Ah yes, here's your file, Mr. Pagropoulis...” In fact, one of the more frightening predictions of science fiction is that our society is moving toward more centralization, more bureaucracy, more impersonal machine-dictated handling of my life. There's no fundamental reason why this should be so, except perhaps some of the ramifications of Parkinson's Law. ===== Parkinson's Law, simply put, is: Work expands to fill the time allowed for it. And one of the subtler results of this universal law is the burgeoning of bureaucracies. If one man decides he can only get a raise by becoming the boss of two other men, he will scheme and wheedle and cajole until he gets a couple of men to do the work he originally did alone. His time will be spent “supervising” his two assistants. And since they are now sharing the work their boss formerly did, it stands to reason that neither of them can be as productive as their boss. This kind of frightening built-in mediocrity can be found in .business firms, government agencies, universities, even churches: wherever large numbers of people gather to work together. The fact, that they are frequently working against each other helps to explain why the output of bureaucracies is so low. What can be done about this? A science-fictionist's , answer might be deceptively simple: replace the bureaucrats with computers, and leave only a few brilliant and dedicated men and women at the top of the organization to run the computers. After all, the archetypical bureaucrat is simply a person who “goes by the book” at all times—that is, he follows his original programming. And he resists, with every ounce of passion he can muster, any attempt to change the programming. “A computer can follow the program better than a human, and it can be reprogrammed rather simply. At worst, you'd have to pull out some circuit boards and interior wiring, which is done much more easily to a machine than to a human being. But this kind of simplistic cure is one of those crazy ideas for which the world is not yet ready. For one thing, the bureaucrats themselves would never allow it. Unless, of course, things were arranged so that the number of computer routines a bureaucrat had cognizance over was just as important—or more so—than the number of assistants he or she could pile up. But bureaucracies are, by virtually every test, a form of living organism. They eat, grow, breed, resist change. It may well be that “the first—and only!—immortal creature on this planet is the. bureaucracy that began in the ancient Roman Republic and survives today within the Catholic Church. The only way a bureaucracy can continue to exist, though, is if there is no way to measure its performance. How many souls has the Catholic Church brought salvation to? There is no way to tell; the Church may be doing a splendid job. But no one on this side of heaven can objectively state that this is so. So—perhaps the only way to change a moribund bureaucracy into a dynamic force for human achievement is to find some way to measure objectively the bureaucracy's performance. How do you know if your local school board is doing an effective job? It should be possible to test the students on their reading skills, and compare the results to the national average or some other agreed-upon standard of excellence. If the kids don't measure up, then neither do the members of the

board. Get rid of 'em! How can a corporation president tell if his public relations department is performing adequately? One way would be to give the whole department a six-month vacation with pay, and see what happens to profits. In most corporations, profits will rise slightly, because the day-to-day costs of expense-account lunches and typewriter ribbons will not be incurred for six months. ===== A modicum of thought will show myriads of ways in which even the most impenetrable bureaucracy can be thrown into the cold light of objective, rational examination. Perhaps the biggest and most dangerous bureaucracies are the political ones—the government agencies that consume tax money and produce little but aggravation. These are more firmly entrenched than most bureaucracies, thanks to the Civil Service regulations that were originally set up to safeguard honest workers against the rampant politics of the spoils system. "The place to start reforming the political machinery is at the top—with the politicians themselves. The basic problem with most politicians is that they are convinced that the most important thing in life is for them to be re-elected. So we must dissuade them of that belief. We have already dissuaded the occupant of the White House from believing that he has a chance to be re-elected more than once. The Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution limits the President to no more than two terms in office. Might it not be a reasonable idea to extend this concept throughout the root and branch of our political system? Why should anyone serve twenty terms in the Congress? Is, this nation so poor in talent that certain men must grow into their dotage in political office? Why not make it mandatory that no officeholder can serve more than two terms? This is bound to produce a "get up or get out" syndrome among politicians. Instead of working for re-election to the same office, they'll be struggling manfully (or womanfully, as the case may be) to get elected to a higher office. There's more prestige, it pays better, and the opportunities for graft will be larger—if that's the kind of politician we're talking about. But this motivating force might work out to the benefit of the taxpayer. The politician might actually have to accomplish something that pleases the voters before he can seriously consider himself a candidate for higher office. After all, there are four hundred and thirty-five Congressmen in the US House of Representatives, and only a hundred Senators in the Upper Chamber. If a Representative were limited to two terms and wanted to move up to a Senator's seat, he just might be tempted to be an effective Representative. Crazy idea, of course. It would never work. But if it were tried, it would have to be installed in parallel with another, even crazier idea: universal public service. The root problem of American politics is that most Americans don't work at it. Most of us vote, and we don't even do that as intelligently as we should—particularly in local elections. But if we are ever to break up the governmental bureaucracies that surround us at the local, state, and Federal levels, then we must all of us be willing to put a few years of our lives into public service. Everyone in the nation could be drafted at age eighteen, man or woman, no exceptions except physical or mental incapacity. This would provide an army of workers who would serve in the governmental agencies for two years each. Everyone in the nation could be drafted again at age forty, with more lenient exemptions (possibly) to provide a corps of leaders for the youngsters. Many Americans are finding that they want to change their life-style at about age forty; a year or so in public service would be a good chance to review their lives, see where they've been and where they'd like to go. And it would be good for the community, the state, the nation. When each of us realizes that he or she is going to devote a few years of service to the community, then we might begin to demand higher standards of performance from our governmental agencies and our elected representatives. It's only when the inner workings of the organization are laid bare that we can reasonably understand what can and cannot be accomplished. But that's just one of those crazy science-fictional ideas. It'll never work. It's just as silly as expecting a President as "hard" on Communism as Richard Nixon to visit Peking. THE EDITOR

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