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Jurimetrics, No!

by Ralph J. Rohner

As the twentieth century ends, we hear recounted the story of the law revolution that began in the 1960's and reached its fulfillment with the constitutional amendment that replaced the Supreme Court with nine outstanding JUDIVACs, who formed the High-Voltage Bench. Little-known details of these momentous events are explained.

September 6, 1968

The A. P. dispatch was buried on page 14. An undiscerning eye might have missed it in the quick scan from national news to sports. In fact, I was digesting the details of the pennant races on page 17 before the latent import of the 8-point headline sprang upon my consciousness. Computer Eases Lawyer's Load, it said.

I read on, unaware of the obviously psychosomatic consequences: a New York research firm had successfully programmed a UNIVAC with the holdings of a million New York State appellate court decisions; by merely punching several key words onto an I.B.M. card, the technician could coerce the metal monster to intone accurately the applicable law, gleaned from as many as 120,000 cases per minute and spewed forth at the quite injudicious rate of 920 lines every sixty seconds. The anonymous A.P.er made so bold as to predict that the procedure could save a lawyer "several weeks of library research". Aghast at this prospect, I re-searched the article for some glimmer of realization (by the writer) of the potential Frankenstein's monster he had loosed upon the legal community.

Thinking back now, I can see I must have fallen asleep naturally. (It had been one of those weeks, and I was tired.) But I still recall the eerie, haunting aura of doom that settled on my mind as the uses of this contrivance revealed themselves to me: a whirring, steel-grey, mechanical fear seized me while I watched an army of dial-faced, undigital jurists marching down the sunlight to my desk....

September 6, 1998

The revolution in law during the last thirty years has been phenomenal. I hope this word tour adequately describes it.

We are in the office of the Chief Justice of the United States. The leather chair last occupied during 1988 is the only reminder of the Court of a decade ago. The rest of the office has been dedicated as a national memorial and contains the original 1968-UNIVAC (graciously donated by Sperry Rand Corporation before it merged with West Publishing Company in 1981). This precursor of our present-day legal system is more than an anachronism now—it is a rusting, antiquated reminder of the law's humble beginnings. It is noteworthy only because it marks the transition from such medieval concepts as Star Chamber, "wager of law" and "trial by jury" to our modern photosynthetic jurisprudence.

The years from 1968 to 1974 were years of trial and error, testing, experimenting and programming. The entire case law of American jurisprudence was reduced to I.B.M. cards, which were then reproduced by the thousands and made available to those schools and law firms which had purchased (or contracted to purchase) a suitable "LEGISVAC". This name, incidentally, was chosen by national lottery and was submitted by an obscure Leavenworth parolee, who was subsequently programmed innocent by the machine he named. No one fully realized in those early years how great had been the impact of the New York Experiment in 1968. But the utility of the I.B.M. system quickly caught on across the nation after Law Day in 1975. Let me explain.

By New Year's Day, 1975, it had become apparent that LEGIVACs had made law books of all types unnecessary. Shepard's Citations had folded. West had cut its digest division to a skeleton crew of seven third-year law students who had had special prelaw training as I.B.M. technicians. Law books of all types were gathering dust in libraries everywhere (except, of course, in those smaller law schools that could not afford or accommodate a full-sized LEGIVAC). Court calendars were hopelessly backlogged because the judges could not keep pace with litigation whose paperwork was completed in minutes.

This last circumstance caused the Ohio legislature to react with fantastic foresight at its opening session in 1975. It authorized a small electronics firm in Cincinnati to design a "JUDIVAC" capable of analyzing the research of two or more LEGIVACs and resolving the controversy in the light of all the applicable precedent. The experiments were successful, and the legislature viewed a secret demonstration in early April, in which the JUDIVAC resolved an action brought under the state's "little Norris-LaGuardia Act" in two minutes and forty-seven seconds.

Braced by the electronics firm's thirty-year warranty, the Ohio legislature, on Law Day, 1975, summarily relieved all circuit court judges of their duties and ordered the installation of JUDIVACs throughout the state. Their operational efficiency was incredible.
Trial calendar backlog of up to twenty-seven months was reduced to the three hours it took to program the machine. Extremely well-written and well-reasoned opinions were simultaneously printed on bond (for the parties) and punched on I.B.M. cards (for the records).

As quickly as the states could appropriate the money, JUDIVACs became, almost exclusively, the decision-makers of our legal system. By 1981 every state in the union used JUDIVACs at least in its intermediate appellate system, and most had procured S-model JUDIVACs to replace the supreme bench of the state.

About this time more inexpensive LEGIVACs appeared on the market. Most were manufactured and programmed by Toshida, Ltd., a Japanese transistor firm which had accurately anticipated the need for more LEGIVACs. Every law office and general practitioner was able to own one, though partnerships often pooled their finances to purchase one that was capable not only of research but also of advocacy. By careful programming, these machines could argue law, facts and policy, could analogize and distinguish cases, could misread, misquote policy, could analogize and distinguish cases, could misread, misquote. Where human judges have been replaced by JUDIVACs, the "clerk-programmer" now assumes a more important role than in yesteryear. Previously, of course, a mere clerk could have little or no effect on the outcome of cases; but now a clerk-programmer actively feeds into the machine's judicial consciousness only those possibilities that will not clog the "adjudicator's" mechanism, and hence its efficiency.

Wary of creating a deus ex machina, the states until 1980 had refrained from using JUDIVACs in equity cases in their courts; obviously, they felt that no legal system should be devoid of any possibility of human error. But in 1980 the work of a young professor of comparative law at the University of Southern California gained national prominence and the immediate attention of state solons. Professor Dubin had demonstrated that it was possible, in the confines of the English language, to distill the essence of equity jurisprudence from the written words of men now dead and courts long since defunct. His theory on the "maximum-minimum result-oriented precedent value syndrome" provided the key for programming the E-(for equity) model JUDIVAC, and states were quick to utilize the technique. The sub of the transition was in requiring both plaintiff and defendant in equity cases to submit to cerebral-electrode-analysis in the courtroom (vaguely similar to the antique "lie-detector" test). The simplicity of this method was overwhelming: It required only the minor change from the "clean-hands" doctrine to the "clean-minds" rationale.

Once proved, the E-JUDIVAC was assimilated by the states at a rapid rate. Different styles were available, depending on the social conscience factors in the intended jurisdiction. New England procured several of the "Lord Eldon" models; the Southern states usually requested the "Roger Taney" machines (except Louisiana, of course, which imported a "Napoleon", manufactured and coded in Renault's Vichy plant). The Western states acquired many later models, catalogued only as "New Frontier Justice".

Lawyers Find Employment in Other Places

You may wonder about the huge unemployment problems created by the adoption of these machines. True, there was some difficulty, but it reflects credit on the initiative and responsibil...
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The Federal Government set up a special CCC program (Court Clerks Conservation Corps) in which clerks key-punched books the Judiciary Act of 1789 and all its progeny which in any way regulated the personnel of federal district and circuit courts. There the profession for some other field offering employment security. The many federal district court judges hastily formed a collective bargaining unit, but this was labeled a “pseudo-union” by the NLRB (exempt, as an administrative body, from the proposed judicial reform) and struck down.

On a higher level, the federal circuit judges called for a national referendum on the question. But the electronics lobby prevented any enabling legislation from gaining a foothold in committee. The F-model JUDIVACs were installed simultaneously in every federal courthouse on July 4, 1984, amid patriotic reaffirmations of our colonial heritage and our constitutional form of government. The date also was conveniently in the midst of summer recess so the machines had several months to practice their motions, certificates and restraint.

There were, understandably, some tragic personal misfortunes resulting from the year 1984. The most noteworthy was probably that of Professor Moore, who had prepared a second series of his monumental treatise on federal practice. The publication date had been set to coincide with the opening of the October Term of the Supreme Court, which, of course, would have been a futile gesture in the light of developments. His life’s work rendered nugatory, Professor Moore applied for federal job retraining under the Johnson plan but was rejected because of the instability of his political views.

Once operating, the F-JUDIVACs proved eminently practical and non-controversial. In fact, the Second Circuit machine injected a note of humor into the judicial arena by reversing a ruling of the General Accounting Office that had upheld the validity of the con-
tract under which the F-JUDIVACs were purchased. The staccato reasoning was that the procuring office (the Justice Department) had indeed let the contract to the lowest bidder but had failed to find it a “qualified” bidder.

As in most “preventive wars,” tactics were limited by strategy, which, in turn, was limited by the competence of the strategists, and the battle against tin-can jurisprudence was lost. The last objectors conceded defeat in 1987, much to President Reagan’s personal satisfaction. He retired to the Presidential retreat in Death Valley over Labor Day with a smirk smile; when he returned to Washington, the smile had become a broad grin. And with good reason. His most cherished legislative crop was ripe for harvesting.

Supreme Court Suffers Electronic Eclipse

When he submitted the proposed constitutional amendment to Congress, there was scarcely a murmur of protest. Within six months every state (except New York and Illinois) had ratified the amendment calling for abolition of the offices of Chief Justice and Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Instead, an elaborate procedure was established whereby the President was to “nominate” nine of the most outstanding JUDIVACs in the country for positions on the High-Voltage Bench. The Congress was then to review the operational efficiency of these machines, their maintenance costs and their geographic origins, and to approve or reject the “appointees”. When accepted by Congress, they were to be trundled to Washington and installed side by side in the old Supreme Court Building.

There were several controversial features of the amendment as first submitted. First, Reagan had suggested that the “nominee” machines must have previously served in either the state or federal court system. This clause was stricken by Congress, which felt that each machine should be judged on its own merits: Even if it had rendered conspicuous service only in a private law firm, or in a corner consultomat, it should still be eligible for promotion.

Second, Congress felt that the nine JUDIVACs should be electrically connected in series. The states were unwilling to accept the amendment in this form since they felt it would stifle the advantages inherent in using machines that had been programmed independently in varying years and jurisdictions. Thus, when the October Term began in 1987, there was for a time hopeless confusion among the nine homesteads. No two opinions could be reconciled with each other, let alone with a majority of the Court. But these inconsistent adjudications were then reanalyzed by an outstanding LEGI-VAC, and a “synthesizing syndrome” was programmed into each of the nine SC-model JUDIVACs. More understandable results were soon forthcoming.

Strangely, despite these corrections, the Court continued to decide cases somewhat ambivalently. In some cases the machines would hum smoothly, in perfect synchronization, and produce a single, simple decision. But more often there was an audible gnashing of gears as one or more of the “justicetrons” found it physically and electronically impossible to agree with its fellows. Separate opinions were often returned, and there was even an occasional short circuit when a machine tried to outdo its adjudicating capacitors.

Science has been attacking this last weakness of our legal system, and the profession expects an answer shortly. The Bar does not seem to be disturbed by the apparent inconsistency of its own profession; On the human level it seeks continuously for greater individuality; but it is content to watch our jurisprudence settle into a morass of homogeneity, certainty and utter predictability.

Thus, you have it. From the first experiment in the 1960’s the die apparently was cast, and now the machinery of the law, rid of its human millstone, purrs inscrutably and efficiently onward. Lord help us all!

President’s Page

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ment of the law against all violators, especially those who would destroy our institutions by violent action; and second to open to the restless and the deprived among our people full participation in the lawful procedures that are the only effective means of social change.

But let us not be frightened by manifestations of discontent. Discontent is not a scare word in America. It is a brave word. It is not a negative word. It is a positive word. This land was settled by the discontented. Its independence, its nationhood and, indeed, its Constitution were conceived and created in response to discontent. The century-long westward pushing of the frontier was impelled by discontent. And almost every significant measure of social, economic and even juristic progress that we have achieved in the crowded years since has come about in an almost continuing response to discontent.

Let us who occupy positions of leadership in a powerful and disciplined calling use our formidable resources to turn in our time the discontent that wracks our society into yet another constructive chapter in the contribution of our profession to the progress of this nation. Let us respond to discontent—not ignore it. Let us direct it into creative channels—not contest it.

We are living in a time of ordeal and of challenge. We cannot do business as usual. We must persuade, when many no longer want to listen. And we must act, when many have lost faith in our action. But the active belief in a society of laws that led us into this profession must reassert itself, whatever the odds.

For the only alternative to law and order is anarchy. And as James Madison, the chief architect of our Constitution, said nearly two centuries ago, “Anarchy ever has, and I fear ever will, produce despotism.”