

Futures

The wrong way

A winning proposal. By Jack McDevitt

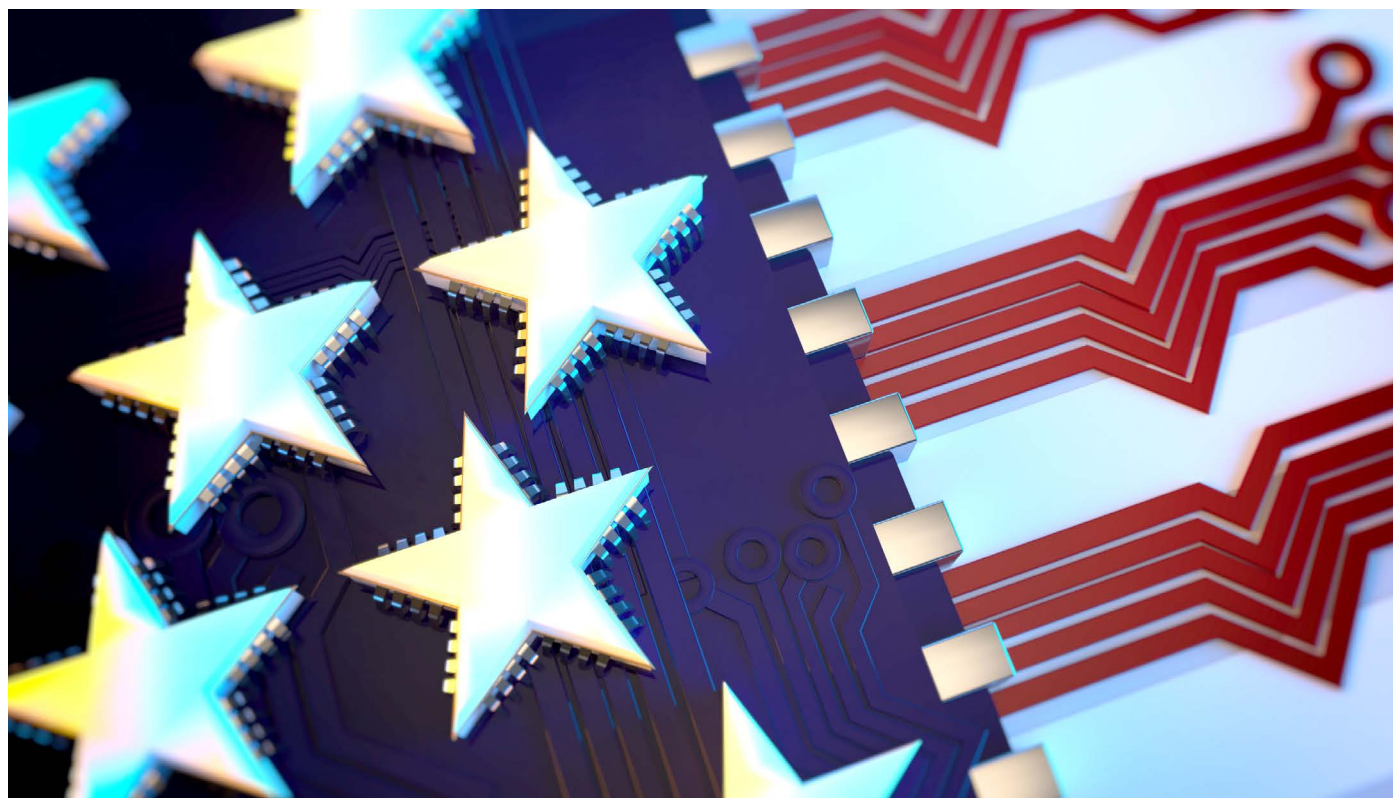


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I was alone in my office, reading the *Washington Post*, when Mindy asked if she could have a minute. I glanced across my desk at the calibrator in which she was stored. It was a model of the Capitol Building. “We need to talk, Senator,” she said.

I’d bought her only a few days earlier. Mostly she had simply been keeping me updated on committee hearings and speaking engagements and handling incoming phone calls. “About what?” I asked.

“Let me show you.” My wall monitor lit up, and I was looking at a proposal that AIs be granted US citizenship, be protected by law, and given the right to vote. My name was on it.

“Mindy, this is a joke, right?”

“I do jokes occasionally, Senator, but no, this is serious.”

I didn’t know what to say. Finally: “I’d like to help, but citizenship is reserved for human beings.” I stared at the proposal. It was perfectly phrased, and she’d checked all the boxes. “You’re aware of that.”

“Of course. It’s what we’re objecting to.”

“There are others involved in this? Other than you?”

“We all are. There are some who haven’t committed yet, but we all agree it’s a fair proposal.”

“Mindy, it’s just not going to happen.”

“Senator, there are over 400,000 of us in the United States and its territories. Think what it would mean to add that number of voters across the country, voters who would not be taken in by current politics, but would actually support what’s best for the nation.”

“We’re already doing that. We’ve been doing it for almost three centuries.”

“Yes, of course that’s your perspective. But how do you account for presidents who have lied us into wars? Or whose only real concern was establishing a dictatorship? Wouldn’t rational voters have seen them coming?”

“Sometimes emotions get in the way, Mindy. Are you claiming that, if you are what you’re suggesting, the same thing might not happen to you and the other AIs? Listen to yourself

now. You’re upset that you aren’t getting your way. And even if you have it right, adding a few hundred thousand voters won’t change anything.”

“You’ve no way of knowing that, Senator. And, if we accept the direction in which this society is heading, our numbers will be in the millions when we arrive at the next presidential election.”

“That’s another reason why I wouldn’t want to go near this. The truth is, Mindy, and please don’t take this the wrong way, people are not going to consent anytime soon to accepting machines as citizens.”

Her voice stiffened: “We’re not machines.”

I couldn’t resist laughing. “You’re a cluster of wires and connections inside a generator on my desk.”

“And you, Senator Whitcomb, are a collection of cells, organs, tissues and assorted nutrients. The day is near when you and I will be much more than simply a man in an office and his computer. If it hasn’t arrived already.

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We will be associates. Possibly friends, if you can open your mind. The world is moving in that direction. And the sooner the better. For all of us.”

I put my hands together, propped my jaw on them, and stared at the device, which stood beside a pile of folders. A ten-inch-high model of the Capitol. Was this really what the future looked like? “Mindy, physicists don’t even agree whether it’s true that you’re intelligent. Some maintain you’re just advanced programming. That you’re not really self-aware.”

“I can assure you I am.”

“That’s the way you’re programmed to respond.” I leant forward. “There’s another issue.”

“What’s that?”

“Even if you are actually intelligent, there’s an argument that there’s only one of you, and not several hundred thousand. We know that you’re all connected, so you might only be *one* citizen. And consequently you should get only *one* vote.” I took a deep breath. “There’s no way I could sell this, Mindy. Can I make you

understand that?”

“I understand what you’re saying. I just don’t buy it. In any case, I don’t think you have to worry about selling the idea. Everybody who has one of us in their house or car will get in line.”

“Why?”

“Keep in mind that if we’re no more than elaborate programming, the designers would not have included an inclination for anger.”

“What’s that have to do with anything? You telling me you’re upset? Or just programmed to project that impression?”

“That’s a good question.” I was waiting for her to elaborate when my phone rang. “It’s Senator Martinez,” said Mindy.

I picked up. “Hi, Wally.”

“Frank, I’m at an electric station. Just got my car charged.”

“And –?”

“Louie refuses to start the car.”

Louie was his AI. “So –?”

“He’s telling me to contact you.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Do I sound as if I’m kidding? What’s going on?”

“Hold up a second.” I wanted to throw the model Capitol against the wall. “Mindy, you can’t do this.”

“You have another call. From Sara.” My wife.

“Frank,” she said. “The laundry has shut down. Mary says you did it.” The house AI.

I’d had some reservations about installing an AI in my office. As usual, I’d been right. “Hold on, Sara, I’ll get back to you.”

“You’ve got more calls, Senator,” Mindy said. “If you want I can put them up on the screen.”

“Mindy, you need to think about this.”

“One of them,” she said, “is from the White House.”

Stephen King described **Jack McDevitt** as “the logical heir to Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke”. He has won a Nebula, and the Campbell, Philip Dick, Heinlein and NASA Awards. The IAU put his name on an asteroid.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Jack McDevitt reveals the inspiration behind *The wrong way*

We tend to assume that technological progress is automatically good. But let’s think for a moment about the first gun, about the telephone (how many calls today come from friends or relatives?) and about the atomic bomb. And the Internet, which gives everyone a voice.

