COMMENTARY

THE SYSTEM

Do you agree with everything that is being done these days . . . with the amount of funds for research, antipoverty projects, foreign aid, the war . . . with the fact that we are at war at all . . . with the draft . . . with efforts to assure all Americans equal rights and opportunities?

If you are dissatisfied, do you feel so strongly about it that you have tried to promote a change?

If so, do you get the feeling that man has lost control of "the system" to an impersonal, automatic, and highly complex force that might be called simply "civilization"?

If so, do you get the feeling that this new super machine is grinding along relentlessly on rules that it, itself, generates without regard to man's wishes?

If so, take heart! You are not alone, and there *is* hope. Just as war would be impossible if enough men refused to kill, so this super machine cannot continue *ad infinitum* against the wishes of a majority. However, the wishes of the majority have to be heard. Otherwise, we will have to await the day when the machine can read minds, a day possibly closer than we think.

Instant world-wide mass communication has already arrived. On television, we can view events in progress on the other side of the planet or on the moon. We have computers that instantly tell whether any reservations are left for your trip to Kalamazoo next Christmas. We hear proposals for a universal instant-credit system to which everything could be charged and which would render everyone monthly statements based on their purchases and loans and the current income requirements of the federal and local governments. With such advanced technology, why do we have to put up with the present archaic system for polling the wishes of the people?

Why can't we have national referenda—daily, if necessary—via a computerized communication network on which people could vote by telephoning a particular number, identifying themselves by holding a finger over the TV camera on the phone, and then, after the central computer has read the fingerprint and verified the fact that the caller has not already voted, proceed to dial a number indicating their choice on whatever was being voted on that day?

Such a system would permit a vote on all questions from the choice of the nation's president to that of Miss Rheingold of 1968 and from ending the bombing of North Vietnam to whether miniskirts should go up or down (or, if both choices sound immoral, remain stationary). It would also remove the frustration of not being sure that one's wishes were being considered. One's only worry would be "Who is going to pay the phone bill?" Even that would be simple for the computer: Spread the day's charges around over those who turned out to be on the winning side. If the charges were lumped together and billed once a month, no one but the computer would ever know how a person voted on any given issue, and the losing side would have the consolation of not having to pay to lose.

Louis G. Stang, Jr.