

*From Player Piano (1952), Kurt Vonnegut*

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the television announcer, "the President of the United States."

The electric car pulled up to the platform, and President Jonathan Lynn, born Alfred Planck, stood and showed his white teeth and frank gray eyes, squared his broad shoulders, and ran his strong, tanned hands through his curly hair. The television cameras dollyed and panned about him like curious, friendly dinosaurs, sniffing and peering. Lynn was boyish, tall, beautiful, and disarming, and, Halyard thought bitterly, he had gone directly from a three-hour television program to the White House.

"Is this man the spiritual leader of the American people?" asked Khashdrahr.

Halyard explained the separation of Church and State, and met, as he had expected to meet, with the Shah's usual disbelief and intimations that he, Halyard, hadn't understood the question at all.

The President, with an endearing, adolescent combination of brashness and shyness, and with the barest trace of a Western drawl, was now reading aloud a speech someone had written about EPICAC XIV. He made it clear that he wasn't any scientist, but just plain folks, standing here, humble before this great new wonder of the world, and that he was here because American plain folks had chosen him to represent them at occasions like this, and that, looking at this modern miracle, he was overcome with a feeling of deep reverence and humility and gratitude . . .

Halyard yawned, and was annoyed to think that Lynn, who had just read "order out of chaos" as "order out of koze," made three times as much money as he did. Lynn, or, as Halyard preferred to think of him, Planck, hadn't even finished high school, and Halyard had known smarter Irish setters. Yet, here the son-of-a-bitch was, elected to more than a hundred thousand bucks a year!

"You mean to say that this man governs without respect to the people's spiritual destinies?" whispered Khashdrahr.

"He has no religious duties, except very general ones, token ones," said Halyard, and then he started wondering just what the hell Lynn did do. EPICAC XIV and the National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Board did all the planning, did all the heavy thinking. And the personnel machines saw to it that all governmental jobs of any consequence were filled by topnotch civil servants. The more Halyard thought about Lynn's fat pay check, the madder he got, because all the gorgeous dummy had

to do was read whatever was handed to him on state occasions: to be suitably awed and reverent, as he said, for all the ordinary, stupid people who'd elected him to office, to run wisdom from somewhere else through that resonant voicebox and between those even, pearly choppers.

And Halyard suddenly realized that, just as religion and government had been split into disparate entities centuries before, now, thanks to the machines, politics and government lived side by side, but touched almost nowhere. He stared at President Jonathan Lynn and imagined with horror what the country must have been like when, as today, any damn fool little American boy might grow up to be President, but when the President had had to actually run the country!