

The Trillion Dollar Laptop

By John F. McGowan

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The Average American is sitting uneasily at a small table in a grimy gun metal gray room with flickering fluorescent lights. The door opens. Wall Street and Uncle Sam enter. Wall Street is wearing a sleek \$4,000.00 black suit and narrow red tie. He carries a sleek black laptop. Uncle Sam is wearing a shiny new blue and gold dress uniform. They sit down opposite the Average American. Wall Street sets up his laptop.

Uncle Sam: Have we got a deal for you!

Wall Street: Boy, do we.

Average American: OK. I am all ears. I could use some good news.

Uncle Sam: Well, you know,.... **(turning to Wall Street)** It is your baby. Why don't you tell him.?

Wall Street: No, no, you.

Uncle Sam: Oh, all right, I'll tell him. So you want to hear some good news?

Average American: Absolutely.

Uncle Sam: See this laptop here?

(Wall Street proudly displays the laptop.)

Average American: Uh, huh.

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Uncle Sam (smiling): Well, thanks to the Cold War and hundreds of billions of dollars in military spending, we now have this laptop. You give him the specs.

Wall Street (smiling): This is the new quad core laptop with built in multi terabyte hard drive. Each core is rated at 3.2 Gigahertz.

Average American (peering uncertainly at the bright color screen of the laptop): OK.... Can my kid play his Obliterator 2009 3D ultra-violent game on it?

Wall Street (frowning): Good heavens, no. Nothing so frivolous. This laptop is running Linux for speed and reliability. Obliterator is a Windows XP game.

Uncle Sam (nodding): Obliterator won't run on Vista.

Average American: OK. I have Windows XP. Well, then, what is this laptop good for?

Wall Street: Well... No, Sam, you tell him...

Uncle Sam (smiling again): Well, you know there are 300 million of you in the US?

Average American: Yep.

Uncle Sam (smiling broadly): Well, the Average American makes about ten financial transactions per day, about 3650 per year. That means about one trillion transactions per year.

Wall Street: 1,095,000,000,000 transactions per year.

Average American (puzzled): OK, ... And that means?

Wall Street rolls his eyes and looks knowingly at Uncle Sam.

Uncle Sam: It means that, thanks to your tax dollars and your Dad's tax dollars and your Grandad's tax dollars...

Wall Street (interrupting petulantly): And the magic of the American free enterprise system.

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Uncle Sam: And the magic of the American free enterprise system. **(dramatic pause)** This one laptop can run the entire US financial system. Banking, stock trading, loan origination, the whole thing. Thanks to the wonders of modern high technology and the Internet, we can do it all on a single laptop with a network connection.

Wall Street: Or maybe two. We should have an emergency backup.

Uncle Sam: Maybe even three just to be safe. Anyway, the financial system used to require hundreds of thousands of clerks, office buildings full of filing cabinets, then hundreds of giant mainframes, Unix server farms. You get the idea.

Wall Street: Yes, but now thanks to the wonders of technology and the American free enterprise system, we have reached the point where a single laptop has the processing power, disk space, and memory to run the financial system. This quad core baby can process over one trillion transactions *per day!*

Average American: That's amazing! Wow! So how much? Five thousand dollars?

Wall Street and Uncle Sam exchange nervous glances.

Uncle Sam: Er, um, eight trillion dollars.

Average American (stunned): Hunh! But I thought you said a single laptop now had the power to run the entire financial system.

Uncle Sam: Er, um, well...

Wall Street (leaning forward): Let me explain this to him. Look, it is a little more complicated than Sam's simple explanation.

Average American: How so?

Wall Street: It's the human touch.

Average American: The human touch?

Wall Street: See, even though the laptop has the raw computing power and can run sophisticated financial software applications that automate most of finance, there are certain key human decisions that can't yet be automated. You need me for that.

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Average American (incredulous): OK... So \$5,000.00 for the laptop and \$8 trillion for you?

Uncle Sam (hastily breaking in): No, it's not that simple. You see my friend here...er, um, lost \$8 trillion speculating in mortgage backed securities.

Wall Street (glaring at Uncle Sam): You made me do it.

Uncle Sam: I did not.

Wall Street: Did too!

Uncle Sam: Did... **(pauses)** We need to think of the good of the country at this time. **(looks at the Average American)** We can't afford to lose my friend here's unique financial skills.

Wall Street (smiling smugly): My human touch, as it were.

Average American (looking rather skeptical): Assuming for the sake of argument that Mr. Wall Street here has these skills, how are we going to lose him?

Uncle Sam: Er, um, well, if we don't pay him \$8 trillion to bail him out, he will go bankrupt.

Average American: So?

Uncle Sam: Well, he will be bankrupt! He won't be able to run the laptop and keep the financial system running! Another Great Depression!

Wall Street: Civilization will collapse! Mad Max! Logan's Run! The Night of the Comet **(The Average American looks puzzled.)** What's that Will Smith movie?

Uncle Sam: Legend. The Omega Man with Charleton Heston was better.

Wall Street: Whatever! We are talking mass starvation, cannibalism, blood drinking vampires in the ruins of Lower Manhattan hunting the few emaciated survivors.

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Average American: Even if he goes bankrupt, he can still run the laptop. **(pausing and looking skeptically at Wall Street)** Can't we get somebody else?

Uncle Sam: Absolutely out of the question. Only my friend here can provide the unique special skills needed to run the laptop.

Average American: Are you sure? I mean he lost \$8 trillion. You know, my kid knows a lot about computers. You sure he can't run your laptop?

Wall Street (sputtering): A teenager?

Average American: Yeah. He knows Visual Basic.

Wall Street (indignant): Visual Basic doesn't run on Linux!

Average American (scratching his head): Can't we just use Windows XP?

Wall Street (outraged): Visual Basic is a toy computer language!

Average American: Seems to work fine for my kid. **(turning to Uncle Sam)** Look, do I really have to pay \$8 trillion for this laptop?

Uncle Sam: You have no choice. This is a democracy and the people have spoken.

Average American: But I am the people.

Wall Street: Look, forget about that democracy stuff. **(Wall Street glances at Uncle Sam in disgust.)** This is a free market. In a free market you have to pay whatever the market will bear. It doesn't matter if you are the people.

Average American (to Uncle Sam): Is that true?

Uncle Sam: I am afraid so. There is nothing I can do.

Average American (looking skeptically at the laptop): Well, why don't I get my own laptop for ... just the five thousand dollars.

Uncle Sam: No, no, no. You have to buy his laptop.

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Wall Street: For \$8 trillion. I want you to know I am giving you a special discount. After all, we are both Americans.

Average American: What would it be without the discount?

Wall Street: \$10 trillion. Realize that I am bending over backwards to give you the discount.

Uncle Sam (nodding): You should thank him.

Average American (looking just a tad upset): Look, my neighbor just lost his job. I am cutting back. Can't I just get my own laptop with Windows XP?

Uncle Sam: Look I sympathize with your feelings. I feel your pain. But we have no choice here. We simply can't function without my friend's unique financial skills.

Average American: Losing \$8 trillion?

Uncle Sam: Could *you* lose \$8 trillion?

Average American: No.

Uncle Sam and Wall Street exchange triumphant glances.

Wall Street: See, you need me. Here's my bill. I accept personal checks.

Wall Street hands a fancy color bill to the Average American:

Quad Core Laptop (16 GB RAM, 10 TB Drive)	\$10 T
Preferred Customer Discount	\$2 T
Linux	(free)
Please Pay:	\$8 T

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