



Richard F. Walters

# Facing the Winds of Change

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To the best of my knowledge, the original "good news, bad news" story was about the pilot who interrupted his passengers to say "the good news is we're about fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. The bad news is we're lost." There have been hundreds of variations on this theme, and anyone who attended the MTA meetings recently concluded in Boston had abundant opportunities to express and hear new variations on the theme. I had many mixed experiences while there: some old friends lamenting "the good old days" when all of our good M friends would be there no matter where or when, and the conversations in the halls and over many social events made the trip worthwhile. I shared some of the nostalgia, but at the same time, I felt the winds of change bringing in some fresh scents and exciting opportunities. My reflections today are an attempt to sort out some of the mixed currents in a complicated setting.

There were a good many really exciting events that took place at the Boston meeting. John Glaser's Keynote Address was one. Anyone previously unaware of the sheer success of Brigham and Women's carefully-planned move to distributed databases supporting thousands of concurrent users on hundreds of servers, all of them PC-based, came away impressed with the incredible success and the understated craftsmanship. This database was conceived at a time when no such systems had ever been developed; there are still none even close in scope. Conventional wisdom on the streets today suggests that no relational model could begin to meet the demands of this application. In fact, some recent articles have suggested that the best solution today is a retreat to mainframes given the lack of success of many less visionary managers to make the client-server model work. No M user could help but swell with pride to know that such a solution was made possible by the technology M provides.

Anyone talking to MDC representatives, after their successful and exciting meeting just prior to the MTA conference, was likewise infected with the enthusiasm universally expressed by all of those somewhat seasoned veterans of a thousand standards battles. They have a job to do; they know it can be done; and they are enthused, excited, and energized to get on with it.

As for my own first-hand experiences, I can't help but relate one incident that took place during the joint part of the meetings. Since I presented a tutorial, moderated a discussion session, and was identified as "Editor" of *M Computing*, I had enough ribbons on my name card to identify me as one of those cartoon Russian diplomats with "hero" medals from chest to waist.

# M COMPUTING

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While walking through a crowd of non-M convention participants, I was stopped by someone intrigued by all the medals who wanted to know, in two or three words, what is so great about M. I stopped a minute (or ten) to begin the usual explanations, but this individual's eyes didn't glaze (as often happens in computer science conferences when I am asked that sort of question). Instead, he grew more excited as he saw the potentials for linking his work with what M provides. He spotted his wife, also a professional database person, and together they pumped me for more information a while longer. I pointed them to exhibits that would expand on what I had introduced, and when we parted, I felt that the language had two new supporters.

I think the most exciting conclusion I reached was that, in some very important ways, M may be achieving today something we have lamented in its absence in those good old days bemoaned by some at this conference: the start of true integration with the rest of the world. This change is occurring as a two-way street: M users are embracing non-M solutions to problems best suited to other languages and systems. But at the same time, non-M users are starting to see what they can do with M as a part of their solutions to complex database problems. This latter acceptance is coming slowly. (It

might happen more quickly if people were to avail themselves of the public domain global handler, with source code available at the ftp site tiger.cs.ucdavis.edu, directory /pub/gum/.) But it is one thread that is emerging as M takes its place alongside other standards in the world.

Like the blind men describing their perception of the elephant, the viewpoints may differ. In this issue, you can see several different viewpoints of the role of M. We face an uncertain future as far as the precise nature of our association, annual meetings, and what their role will be in this changing perspective of the role of M in the heterogeneous solutions of tomorrow's problems. But it seems increasingly likely that M will be a part of those solutions. These are indeed exciting times in which to live. Stay tuned, and keep your running shoes handy, if only just to keep up with the crowd! **M**

Richard F. Walters, Ph.D., is a professor at the University of California, Davis and the executive editor of *M Computing*. Write to him care of MTA's managing editor.



THE VICE PRESIDENT  
WASHINGTON

March 24, 1996

M Technology Association  
1738 Eton Road, Suite 205  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20903-1725

Dear Friends:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to send my personal greetings to everyone participating in the 25th Annual Conference of the M Technology Association. While I regret not being able to join you for this important gathering, I do want to extend my best wishes for a successful and productive event.

The development of a National and Global Information Infrastructure will advance and enhance the way we live, work, learn, and share information with each other here in the United States and around the world. Communications technologies will play a critical role in a global economy that is ever more dependent upon information for expanded business and trade opportunities.

In addition, President Clinton and I are committed to making sure the goal of universal service is met so that all Americans can benefit from the communications revolution. As a nation we cannot tolerate--nor, in the long run, can we afford--a society in which some children become fully educated and others do not, in which some patients benefit from shared medical expertise and others do not, in which some people have access to lifetime learning and job training and others do not.

I know that all of you attending this important event share this vision. Please accept my best wishes for your continued success in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Al Gore

AG/mrm

MTA received this letter from Vice President Al Gore, an invited guest speaker for the 1996 Conference.

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