

The trouble with trickles.

Inspired in part by "The Trouble with Tribbles," *Star Trek* season 2, episode 15.

IN THE days of trickle-down economics when wishes were still of some use, the first trickle cooed its way into the welcoming arms of future President Ronald Reagan's future Office of Management and Budget director in Lansing, Michigan. It, the trickle, didn't quite look like what it was, the way a Lionhead rabbit doesn't quite look like a rabbit. It was unimaginably soft, warm, cuddly and cooing. It sounded like the trickle said, "Love me. I can help."

The future OMB director, who represented mid-Michigan in the House of Representatives, drove from Lansing to Detroit to give trickles to attendees at the 1980 Republican National Convention. He had four trickles. By the time he got to Cobo Hall, there were twenty.

"Take stock, man," he said at the RNC. "Poverty is rampant. So many people who have so little. To ease the struggle, I bring trickles to snuggle." The fur balls, now forty where the twenty had been, purred. It was almost impossible not to want one.

"When everyone has a trickle," he continued, "no one will want for a trickle. Trickles will bring hope and comfort." Sixty trickles quivered in agreement. They smelled of sugary, fruity pheromones. Everyone in the room clamored for one.

George H.W. Bush, one of the candidates for President, crossed his arms in skepticism. "Supply-side economics," he harrumphed. "Voodoo economics. People can't live on hope and comfort." The trickles let out ear-piercing screeches.

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“In the 1890s it was the horse-and-sparrow theory,” said another doubter. “Feed the horses plenty of oats, and the sparrows get what passes through.” The trickles emitted malodorous fumes. Someone opened the windows.

“Trickles won’t reach the multitudes of have-nots,” said Candidate Bush. “They’ll flow up to the big corporations and the people at the top. People at the bottom need more than a trickle.”

Candidate Reagan stroked his trickle. “Let’s get these over to the convention hall right away,” he said. The trickles, all 100 of them, puffed up as one.

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At Cobo, the oratory was most impressive, and hundreds of trickles scurried their ways into the hands of delegates. Delegates and trickles were everywhere, on tables, in seats, and stuck to walls. Ronald Reagan won the Republican nomination for president and George H.W. Bush was nominated for vice-president. All of the RNC delegates, over a thousand, took home trickles.

In November 1980, Reagan and Bush were elected and in January 1981 they were sworn into office, Reagan’s left hand on a Bible from his mother and his right hand on a trickle. Trickles abounded in the White House and throughout Washington. Over the next months, the government cut taxes while spending more on the military and huge entitlement programs. The burgeoning federal debt multiplied like trickles.

Reaganomics was spending the country out of a recession.

Yet something was wrong. If trickles made it to the poor at all, they weren't good for much. They made good scrub pads. After that, they passed back up to rich people faster than you could say Captain Kirk. The impoverished needed a waterfall of work, not a trickle of dole, but the concept of "waterfall economics" was inconceivable.

More surprising was what people at the top felt. No matter how many trickles they had, rich people were never satisfied, so they were always unhappy. They had more than enough, yet they wanted more. And when you have that much, the only purpose of having more was to have more.

Worse, trickles had a tranquilizing effect on empathy. Rich people could hear, but many of them were deaf to destitution and acquiescent in its persistence. They had sight but no vision. They didn't truly know trickles. "None of us really understand what's going on," said the director of the Office of Management and Budget, quoted in *The Atlantic* in December, 1981. That exposé undercut the whole trickle-down theory, collapsing it. Nobody wanted trickles any more.

Deprived of love, trickles stopped reproducing and dried up, leaving nothing behind but dust and disillusionment. A "sanitary engineer" found the last White House trickles in a leaky toilet, one of many leaks over the years. He beamed them into the future, where, he said in a Scottish accent, "they'll be na tribble at'all." That's why they can still be found to this day, emblems and carriers of a debunked economic theory Klinging on to billionaires.

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