



EVENT HORIZONS... THE NEXT TEN YEARS

On December 31, 1999, the world held its collective breath as clocks moved ever closer to the milestone moment of midnight, January 1, 2000. Melding anxiety and anticipation into an event known as Y2K, this momentous shift in time offered an exquisite balance between adventure and unavoidable mass destruction unprecedented in world history.

For months, even years prior to this event, media pundits, computer “experts” self-styled apocalyptic prophets, religious cranks from the left, right and off center predicted dire and inescapable consequences because the Y2K “problem” would cause computers around the world to reset their internal clocks to the year 1900. The anticipated disasters included airplanes falling from the skies, financial institutions grinding to a halt and electric power stations fading to black, plunging humankind into a primordial darkness guaranteed to herald the beginning of a new Dark Ages.

In the period leading up to this change of centuries, John Hamre, the Deputy Secretary of Defense under President Clinton, said, “The Y2K problem is the electronic equivalent of the El Nino and there will be nasty surprises around the globe.” The truth was slightly different; 150 slot machines in Delaware stopped functioning and in Australia bus ticket validation systems failed to operate within two states. Secretary Hamre’s dire predictions of world-wide catastrophe, coupled with Armageddon prophecies of doom from the sensationalist press, proved just how wrong the realms of government and journalism can be. In short, the world went on with barely a burp.

Yet the smugness of hindsight cannot be an excuse for avoiding insight. While high school instructors in desiccated American History classes across the nation dwell on past events and dates, the lessons of history, particularly over the last decade, must be a guidepost, albeit an imperfect one, for looking to the future. No event or circumstance defined the first ten years of the twenty-first century more than the tragedy of September 11, 2001. A continuous barrage of televised images showing commercial jets slamming into Manhattan skyscrapers summarized one lesson and demonstrated an inescapable conclusion for future generations of Americans: Lethal vulnerability was a basic component of American life.

It was a learning experience an older generation underwent over half a century earlier. The insular layer of protection offered by two ocean fronts lapping against American shores evaporated on December 7, 1941. Without warning to the average man on the street, the United States entered into a world-wide conflagration of war played out on a scale previously unknown in human history.

Predictions of future events are a risky undertaking, perhaps best left to store front psychics, TV Weathermen and Wall Street stockbrokers; yet the lessons of the past decade offer telling possibilities for and about the next ten years. New threats facing America are just as sinister but more subtle than the atrocities of Pearl Harbor and 9-11. The United States of America is in a slow but apparently unstoppable meltdown. Random acts of violence, usually committed by alienated teenage boys (or in one case, an Army psychiatrist) continue to occur with a growing frequency. Immediate media saturation coverage of these events, driven more by sound bytes than insights, offers continuous visual replays of the acts but provides little if any awareness of the causes leading up to them. For a week to ten days, television news anchors, tabloid magazines, self-anointed psychologists and internet sites pontificate about a senseless crime committed in a small community by an even smaller person who seeks the Holy Grail

of notoriety. UFO encounters, bipolar disorders, messages from God, Satan and Elvis, excess sugar intake and a myriad assortment of other “disadvantages” are and will continue to be presented as substitutes for responsibility and consequences incurred by one’s own actions. Based on the repetitiveness of these acts over the last ten years, future responses to these horrors will diminish to the level of the common place. The American ethos will be defined by its penchant for violence.

Technology or more specifically, dependence on computerization will continue to become inherent aspects of everyday life. Even now, computer swipe cards and ID barcode stickers are common place requirements for subway, bus and automobile travel around New York City. The growing convenience of debit cards reduces hard currency to the level of an anachronism. The ever-growing matrix of “cradle to grave” information is a seminal backdrop for tracking that can usher in what futurologist Alvin Toffler, the author of *Future Shock*, might dub as a “Technotator;” a tyrant who rules not by military might but by amassing huge amounts of data.

In the field of American education, computers provide access to facts, but offer little in the way of analytical thought. It is now common in American schools to encounter children who cannot tell time on a traditional clock or perform basic arithmetic skills with pen and paper. “Why should we?” they ask, “Isn’t that what our calculators are for?”

The growing reliance on computers becomes more embedded within the culture on a daily basis and is often closer to home than anyone (including me) might care to admit. In a case of irony that stands dangerously close to the shadow of hypocrisy, along with spontaneous crashes and fury-inducing freeze ups, the computer upon which this essay was composed offers spell check and grammar correction options, a feature that renders traditional dictionaries obsolete. In answer to the reader’s logical question of usage generated by this admission, honesty can allow only one plea—Guilty as hell.

In 1956, a technological Stone Age for today’s youth, pop diva Doris Day sang the theme song of *Que Sera, Sera* in the motion picture ironically titled *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The tag line of her famous ballad was, “The future’s not ours to see...” By the time 2020 rolls around (assuming we are not deleted during the predicted Yuletide apocalypse in 2012) let us hope that these lyrics are not the epitaph for *The Men Who Knew Too Little*.

