

Esquire

BEFORE WE HEAD INTO
THE NEXT DECADE, LET'S TAKE A
MOMENT TO CONSIDER THE LAST TEN
YEARS. BOTH BECAUSE THEY PRODUCED SUCH
UNPREDICTED HAVOC—AND BECAUSE THEY PRODUCED US.

3650 DAYS

The setting on this particular Thursday being a newspaper, there naturally were dozens of television screens and computer terminals, all of them active and glowing and invited into this place, like dozens of prisms eating the brains out of a dying industry. You could walk from one part of the building to another and, silvery as an angel's wing against the high blue sky, the balloon seemed to be moving with you, as though you were in the sky with it, moving, right to left, from one screen to another, appearing and disappearing and appearing again. The interstitial spaces between screens were filled with the low hum of conversation. There was a kid in the balloon—or in the contraption beneath it. What can he be thinking? What if he falls out, on television, right there in front of us? And then another screen,

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and the balloon sailing along, right to left, appearing and disappearing again, and you along with it, following, following, from Editorial past the Message Center, and through Sports and into the Newsroom, from screen to screen, desk to desk, as though it were all happening in pixels and bytes and not a real event at all in the skies over Colorado. A goddamn silly hoax, but a goddamn silly hoax that got up the ass of the people at NORAD, who look at the screens in their offices, day after day, and wonder if they'll see the Horsemen riding by at last.

And what of it, October 15, 2009, this one day out of the last 3,650 of them that have piled up like dust and bone, steel and ash, collapsed on top of one another, the fresh accumulating rubble of the only new century most of us will ever know? It's already been put to use as a cautionary fable of the numbing of our individual souls and the dumbing of our collective mind. It is not the first one of these, and it will not be the last. The most enduring lesson, however, is the one that is forgotten, over and over, as our technology gets more advanced, and an age already accelerated begins to pick up even more speed, and historical memory becomes that which came over your BlackBerry fifteen seconds ago. The most enduring lesson is our apparently limitless capacity to be caught unaware.

Why is the unexpected any kind of surprise anymore?

We live now in a vicarious age, but we don't live our lives through other people. Instead, we live our own lives vicariously through what our technology creates. It brings us community by allowing us to gather together, without really moving, in a virtual space far from the reality of events, and the more sophisticated the technology, the farther that distance, until we find ourselves with several personal realities from which to choose. We live our lives *through* things, not in them. We invest ourselves in our artificial realities rather than involve ourselves with the actual one, which is boring and slow and not as efficient. It becomes easy then to categorize the events that happen, to compartmentalize them within the parameters of our created realities—Republican and Democrat, red and blue, liberal and conservative, urban and rural—so that they make some sort of sense. The technologies that are now at our fingertips promise a reality as efficient and logical as they are. They represent us in those realities, and we live vicariously through our little machines.

So why are we surprised by surprises? Because even the shocking is supposed to be predictable now. Hell, we carry computers now in our pockets and in our purses and on the dashboard of the car. Because at those moments when the towers fall or the city drowns or the balloon goes up, there is a long moment before we're able to work the actual events into the realities we have created for ourselves. That is what passes for surprise these days—that long moment of hesitation when the real world cracks through again, those first few hours before we have had a chance to remove ourselves again through our technologies to that distant place within which they bring us together, the places we can go without ever moving at all. Things are real again, and then gone.



THESE 3,650 DAYS HAVE BEEN BOOKENDED BY FANCIFUL APOCALYPSES,

one modern and one ancient. In 2000, the Y2K glitch was going to send us tumbling back down through the technological dark ages to those dim times when nobody could sit at their desks and bet on football or surf for porn. The year came and went, and the computers went humming along right through it as though there never had been a year's worth of Old Testament stick-waving concerning how near the End was. Now, as the first decade comes to a close, there has been a small cottage industry—and one big, festering bag of pus of a feature film—concerning the so-called Long Count calendar of the Mayans, which purports to call for a general collapse of things on December 21, 2012, which is said to be the end of a 5,125-year era. In both cases, there was just enough information coming from just enough sources just swiftly enough for a reality to be constructed, the latter confounding the several actual Mayans, who were trotted before the cameras in order to say that, no, they didn't expect the world to end. But the two events—one in the very first of the 3,650 days and one at the very end of them—share a space in our manufactured realities.

We are a people now who expect a scheduled apocalypse.

The gospels have none of that, of course. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh." Well, that may have been fine for Galilean

fishermen and itinerant carpenters, but today, that simply will not do. We are busy people. We have Day Planners and BlackBerry's and telephones that can function as watches and calendars, all of them parceling out our lives for us, working the daily circumstances of being into their own accelerated realities. We are booked solid. Let us check. We might be able to work the End of the World in sometime between lunch and that conference call to the coast. Check back later. Have your archangel e-mail my assistant.

And the truly ironic thing about it, and the Mayans would have found it more hilarious than anyone else, is that the only true function of these speculative apocalypses is that they serve best as a distraction from—and therefore as protection against—actual catastrophes, which really do come, as Paul warns us that Christ will return “like a thief in the night.” If nothing else, these 3,650 days have been a testimony to the futility of forecasting. When the decade began, there was a healthy economy and a relatively peaceful world. Those two things did not last 3,000 days.

One of the 3,650 days saw religious medievalism commit mass murder in broad daylight, and another one of them saw a major American city inundated and destroyed as a functional habitat for human beings. And what are those two days now, at the end of the 3,650, even as unthinkable as they would have been when the centuries turned, one into the other? Two wars begun as a consequence of that first day grind on, out of sight and out of mind. The city ruined in that second day is still captured at its heart by neglect and decay. They have become part of a past we have become too busy to reflect on, much less understand.

And one of the 3,650 days saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average close at 14,164.53, the highest it had ever reached, and another one of them saw it close at 6,500, while serious gray men in expensive suits talked darkly of depression and worse, and came hat in hand to the government to avert the gallows that you could see in their eyes. And what are those two days now, at the end of the 3,650, even as unthinkable as they would have seemed when the centuries turned, one into the other? The country now operates with the aspect of a population of refugees.

One of the 3,650 saw Saddam Hussein fall, and another saw Osama bin Laden escape.

One of the 3,650 saw a president inaugurated with fraud and deceit clinging to him, and another saw a president inaugurated with a million people gathered along the mall, hoping that he would clear away the wreckage and count up the cost of it.

One of the 3,650 saw a space shuttle burn up deep in the skies of a Texas morning, and another one of them saw a robot vehicle wandering the surface of Mars, and another one saw a projectile burrow deep into the moon and find water there.

One of the 3,650 saw a bridge collapse in Minneapolis, and another one saw scientists complete a map of the entire human genome.

In a fragmented, accelerated world, there was no way to see these things coming. Our technologies have brought us into realities in which there is no time to reflect, to make the connections between what we knew once and what is happening to us now. There were people who knew what Al Qaeda could do, and what it was capable of doing. There were analysts who knew the case for war in Iraq was an ungodly blend of wishful thinking and stovepiped bullshit. There were generals who knew what Afghanistan has meant to twenty-five hundred years' worth of

invading armies. There were folksingers who sang eighty years ago about what happens when the levees break. There were politicians talking about “infrastructure” before the bridge collapsed. There were economists who saw the technology bubble—and, later, the housing bubble—for the threats that they were. And yet the towers fell and the city drowned and the economy ate itself, and the reaction in all three cases became the mantra for the first 3,650 days of the new century.

“Nobody could have predicted...” and fill in whatever the disaster du jour turned out to be.

This was not true, of course. There were people who knew, and who were willing to say, but nobody listened to them, not because we are all willfully ignorant but because we live now within realities in which there isn't enough time to make the connections between what we can know and what happens. In that case, forecasting becomes mere guesswork, a reading of our personal auguries. Consider how easily we fell for the magic spells of the financial-services industry and its pitchpeople on cable television—the difference between Jim Cramer and the late Reverend Ike was never vast, but people chose not to notice—and then, when it all came crashing down and people were thrown out of their homes and they saw their retirement savings dry up, the simplest remedies were the ones most easily rejected. Watching those same people in the aftermath of what their hubris had brought down upon the country made you realize that what they do is the functional equivalent of cutting up a goat on a rock and reading the entrails.

So we wedge even these things that touch us so closely in our actual lives into the artificial realities, which engages us in a kind of magical thinking, sending us off to talk to one another in the enduring language of myth, as though what is happening to us were through forces beyond our control, accustomed as we are to depending on machines we only marginally understand. Consider the widely bruited conclusion that the attacks of September 11, 2001, showed us that the “oceans could no longer protect us.”

In the actual world, this was nonsense. Several generations of Americans grew up knowing that several thousand Russian ICBMs were aimed at them and that the oceans were likely to be an ineffective defense. The oceans couldn't even protect the Mayans, which is why there were so few of them left to be interviewed this year. But the language of the vicarious reality within which we conduct so much of our daily lives—the one in which we can invest ourselves without really involving ourselves—had no vocabulary for what had happened because it had happened in the actual reality. So in response, we bypassed the technology and went all the way back to something deep in the memory of the species, an answer drawn from the days when gods brought the storms down from the high places for reasons as obscure and unfathomable as the explanation for how your telephone can now show you movies on an airplane.

The past 3,650 days have confounded us because, as we get more information from more different places, and faster than we ever have before, we become more easily confounded. We have become comfortable living our own lives vicariously at the touch of a button. And we walk, slowly, from room to room, and the great silver balloon follows us across a sky at eye level, from one screen to the next, and nobody really knows where it will land. ☺

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 1, 1801.

2. The second part is a report from the Secretary of the Treasury, dated January 1, 1801.