

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

The Old-Fashioned Three-Day Weekend

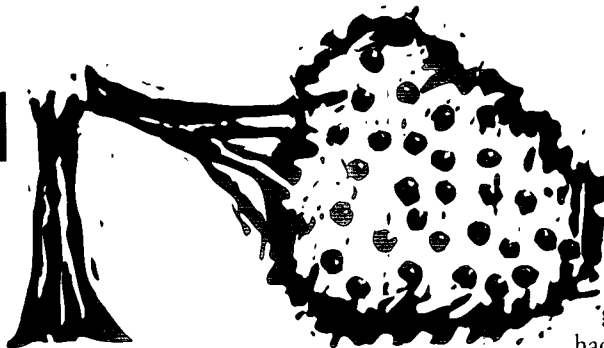
When tradition faces off against the almighty buck, smart money will always go with the buck. Consider one of the overlooked revolutions of our generation: the Uniform Holiday Act of 1968, which provided that beginning in 1971, Memorial Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, and Washington's Birthday (later demoted to the beloved "Presidents' Day") were to fall only on Mondays. Poor George's holiday was trumped by the bill that bears his likeness.

For years, Florida Senator George A. Smathers, best known as JFK's sidekick in the pursuit of venereal happiness, crusaded for the three-day weekend. The eminently practical Smathers even wanted to junk Thanksgiving Thursday and transplant the Fourth of July.

The Monday holiday bill found its weightiest ally in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The chamber's arguments for uprooting the old holidays were no more elevated than the bottom line:

- It would reduce absenteeism—no more calling in sick on Friday after a Memorial Day Thursday.
- Production would not experience mid-week disruptions.
- Travel-dependent industries would prosper.

When the bill came to the House floor in May 1968, shrewd supporters had tacked on a provision establishing Columbus Day as a national holiday. This ensured the measure's passage, despite the futile effort of Rep. Edward Derwinski (R-Ill.) to rename Columbus Day "Discoverers of America Day" as a way to also honor a Polish explorer and "put an end to the Polish jokes which have swept the country." (Lech Walesa eventually did that.)



The Daughters of the American Revolution "vigorously protest[ed] this downgrading of our national heroes," but the white-haired bluebloods were no match for Chamber of Commerce greenbacks. Neither was the ramshackle Lord's Day Alliance, whose director complained, "Most ministers like long holidays about as much as they do the devil. The choir, ushers, Sunday school teachers, and the whole congregation join the mass exodus."

Congressman Robert McClory (R-Ill.), who co-managed the bill on the floor, gamely conjectured that families would spend the long weekends visiting Arlington National Cemetery, Gettysburg, and other "famed battlegrounds and monuments," including, presumably, the Tomb of the Unknown Shopper.

New York Democrat Samuel Stratton, self-proclaimed "father of Monday-holiday legislation" (but no friend to the Father of our Country) declared that three-day weekends would "refresh and restore the spirits and the energies" of federal employees.

The bill's cantankerous opponents were not impressed. Michigan Republican Edward Hutchinson called it "a rejection of our historic past"; North Carolina Democrat Basil Whitener grumbled that "a few business organizations would make more profit on Mondays" at the expense of "the tradition and background of our Nation.... Let us not peg everything to the dollar."

Rep. Joe Waggoner (D-La.) thundered, "Holidays and commemorative

events were not created for the purpose of trade or commerce." The intrepid Waggoner, whose district must have had mighty few Knights of Columbus, even took aim at Mr. 1492: "I think it needs to be said since we seem to be so proud of Columbus, that when he left for this country he did not know where he was going, and when he got here, he did not know where he was, and when he got back, he did not know where he had been."

The traditionalists had a monopoly on wit. Fletcher Thompson (R-Ga.) offered an amendment to rename our holidays "Uniform Holiday No. 1, Uniform Holiday No. 2," etc. The immortal skinflint H.R. Gross (R-Ia.), who had opposed spending government money to keep the eternal flame over JFK's grave, proposed to move Christmas and New Year's Day to Monday. The Mondaynes were not amused.

The Uniform Holiday Act of 1968 passed the House, 212-83, and the Senate by voice vote, without debate. "This is the greatest thing that has happened to the travel industry since the invention of the automobile," rejoiced the president of the National Association of Travel Organizations.

Rep. Dan Kuykendall (R-Tenn.) saw it differently: "If we do this, 10 years from now our schoolchildren will not know what February 22 means. They will not know or care when George Washington was born. They will know that in the middle of February they will have a three-day weekend for some reason. This will come."

This has come.

—*Bill Kauffman*

BookTalk

DESTINATION MARS

By Frederick Turner

The Case for Mars

By Robert Zubrin with Richard Wagner;
The Free Press, 250 pages, \$25

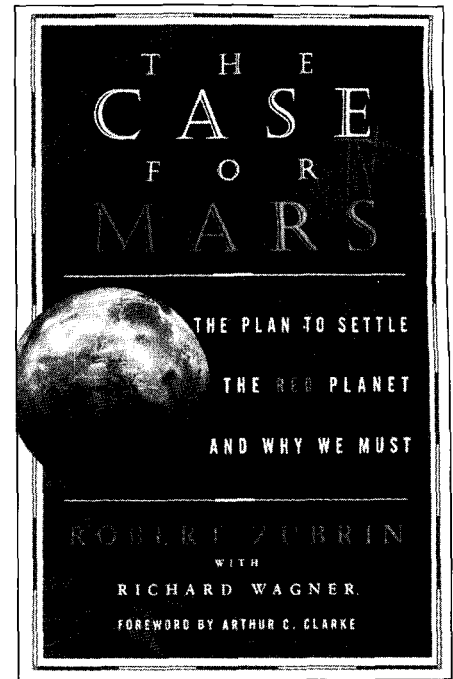
The recent discovery that life probably existed on Mars holds a number of stunning implications. One is that life may be common in the universe—that wide green planets, their plains and hills and oceans teeming with activity, may lie waiting for us under the light of alien suns. Another, scarcely whispered yet, is that since Mars' climate and geology seem to have started evolving more quickly than Earth's, the germs of Earthly life may have originated on Mars and been carried to our planet inside a meteorite, as the dead fossils were. Thus we would all turn out to be Martians, and to go to Mars would be to go home. A third implication—and this contains profound moral and economic significance—is that if life once existed on Mars, it could again, and we might earn for our generation the eternal fame of having brought a dead planet back to life.

With admirable clarity, *The Case for Mars* lays out a workable plan for sending a cheap and relatively safe expedition to the surface of that planet and establishing permanent settlements there. Depending upon our actions, this will be seen either as one of our civilization's rallying points after the moral exhaustion of the Cold War and the collapse of socialism, a moment when we dedicated ourselves to a task worthy of a democratic nation, or as a bitter sign that we had abandoned the glory road of the human spirit.

Robert Zubrin is a true engineering genius, like the heroic engineers of the

past: Telford, Corliss, Piccard, Carnot, Eiffel, Steinmetz, Diesel, Brunel. But unlike them, he is alive and working on the private side of the space industry at what must be for him a frustrating time. NASA's 1989 Space Exploration Initiative, advocated by George Bush and overseen by Vice President Quayle (whose much-ridiculed remark about life on Mars may not have been as silly as it sounded), would have cost \$450 billion; it died a fitting death on the budget-cutting table. It was essentially a way for big technology companies to get the government to pay for fancy borderline research and hire huge staffs of salary-boosting subordinates. Zubrin's plan has the supreme elegance of all great ideas, and its elegance shows in its price tag: a mere \$30 to \$60 billion spread over a decade. Its technology is not state-of-the-art. Indeed, Zubrin delights in pointing out how the basic chemical processes he proposes to use were invented by bewhiskered nineteenth-century Germans and used in Victorian factories, and how he and his colleagues created a demonstration project on Mars refueling, working with mail-order components and a budget less than the cost of a luxury automobile.

Essentially he proposes to refuel on Mars (the second safest place in the solar system, as he rightly calls it) before the explorers even leave Earth. Two years before the human crew takes off, a robot base lands on Mars, carrying a small payload of hydrogen, a power plant, life support systems, a pressurized light truck for transportation, a habitation for human beings, and a vehicle to return the astronauts to Earth. Mars' carbon dioxide atmosphere is sucked into a childishly simple chemical device, and reacted with the hydrogen



to make methane (a potent rocket fuel) and water. Some of the water is kept for the future dwellers' uses; the rest is broken down into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen is recycled back into the fuel-creating system, and the oxygen is stored as the oxidant for the methane and as the breathable atmosphere of the habitation. Zubrin, in other words, has found a way to use the miracle element carbon in the way that life all over Earth uses it, as the essential lever to tweak other elements into doing what one wants.

When the base, with a theoretically unlimited life-support capacity, is ready, the crew, together with a second complete habitation, a return vehicle, a truck, and a refueling system, land on Mars. Crew members will be able to spend several months there in relative comfort, protected from space radiation by Mars' atmosphere, and to explore the surface and prepare for the next group. Zubrin's plans for the further settlement of Mars are equally elegant. Mars' climate, he shows, is ready to be nudged by modest human efforts into a runaway greenhouse effect, giving the planet a warm thick atmosphere, water running on the surface, and all the ingredients for flourishing bacteria and plants.

Zubrin's economic ingenuity is no less remarkable. He proposes that the nation offer money prizes to the first private corporations achieving the technological goals that will add up to a successful Mars expedition. This idea neatly relieves the