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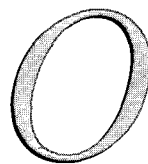
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Bird's Eye

KARL ZINSMEISTER

Grading the '90s



One thousand years was more than we could handle just now. So rather than inflict a "Millennium Wrap-Up" on you this fall, we at *The American Enterprise* decided to try something more modest: Helping you make sense of the last decade. An intriguing way to do this, we thought, would be to pick a couple dozen important figures from history and then ask some distinguished essayists to imagine what those individuals would have thought of the 1990s had they been able to witness them. In this way you get not only some good vinegary analysis of the times we've just passed through, but also a little refresher course on fascinating people from earlier eras. (Let's face it, Americans could avoid a lot of trouble if they knew more history.)

Mark Twain—whose eyeballs we look through in one of our essays—said that all people could be sorted into three categories: the commonplace, the remarkable, and the lunatics. We picked historical personages from each of those groups. You'll find them all rattling away, through the voices of their modern alter egos, starting on page 40.

While waiting for these essays to come in, I got to thinking about someone in my own immediate life who might've had a telling thought or two on the '90s. After experiencing all of the twentieth century as preface (she was born in 1900) my grandmother observed most of the current decade before she died in 1996.

For a sense of how dizzying many aspects of the '90s must have seemed to her, look at the photograph nearby. Whoever took this shot wanted to show my great-grandfather breaking a new pony to harness (that's him walking in the dark coat). What really fascinates me, though, is a detail in the background.

Look behind the pony. That's the house my grandmother grew up in and shared with her parents and sister until she was ten. It had two rooms: a kitchen and a combination living room/bedroom. My grandmother was born in the living room after a difficult labor with no anesthetics or modern medicine. She slept in her parents' bed for several years until her baby sister arrived, at which point she shifted to the couch. The place had no indoor plumbing, electricity, or heat beyond the wood stove. Raising youngsters in such conditions today might get child-welfare authorities after you.

Yet I can assure you my grandmother was not neglected. Nor was she some Appalachian waif; hers was a quite typical farm family in central Ohio; she went on to graduate from college. Nor is this ancient history—she was a woman who heard cell phones ringing in shirt pockets and saw Republicans re-take the House.

You can imagine how certain aspects of the 1990s would look to such a person. You didn't want to give my grandmother the crybaby speech about how hard it is for couples to make ends meet now. For a woman who cooked on a wood-burning stove until she was 37, the material bounty of our era was a hard-earned marvel, not something to take for granted. At the same time, Marjorie Wilcox would have found many aspects of 1999 life somewhere between puzzling and disturbing. I think the thing that would have appalled her most is how little devotion and cohesion now exists within many families, and how little of their own time and essence many parents are willing to pour into their children.

The sublime English poet William Wordsworth spent most of his life in a simple country cottage devoting his days to "plain living and high thinking." Some 1990s citizens have reversed that formulation. We've never lived higher; lucky us. But we've allowed too much of our thinking to become plain, or even degraded—dragged down by a gutterized popular culture, a collapse of standards among responsible elites, and an explosion of narcissism.



YOU DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE MY GRANDMOTHER THE CRYBABY SPEECH ABOUT HOW HARD IT IS TO MAKE ENDS MEET IN THE 1990s.

Our amiably amoral President is an apt symbol of this warm, friendly, and too common strain of corruption. Bill Clinton brings to mind Clarence Darrow's statement: "When I was a boy, I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it."

Even as we exult that our society has never been healthier in material terms, many Americans fret over ethical conditions in the '90s (despite our awareness that any moral criticism today can get you tarred as a fogey, fossil, or fascist), simply because we recognize that, eventually, the various facets of a culture all interconnect. A society won't remain economically robust over the long run if its discipline disappears. Its politics won't be healthy if honesty rots away. Edmund Burke pointed out that "Men are qualified for civil liberties in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their appetites," and that's truer in the '90s (where self-control is often the only remaining governor on behavior) than it ever was before.

But the 1990s are not truly an anything-goes era. The great social critic Robert Nisbet noted some time ago that while on the surface ours is a period of unbridled freedom, in areas of economics, schooling, local independence, family life, and self-determination—the sectors "by far the most vital to any free society"—modern citizens are often wrapped in bureaucratic chains. Nisbet notes that across stretches of history ranging from the Caesars to Napoleon, relatively superficial liberties like sexual laxity have often created "the illusion of individual freedom" in societies that are actually growing "steadily more centralized, collectivized, and destructive of the diversity of allegiance, the autonomy of enterprise...that any genuinely free civilization requires."

Signs of this utterly-liberated-yet-tightly-controlling mentality are all around us in the '90s—for instance on college campuses, where every drug and sex experiment is indulged, and every minority-led building seizure or newspaper burning excused, yet you can be expelled for calling someone a water buffalo or parodying feminism or ebonics. This is a strange 1990s paradox, and it comes up repeatedly in our essayists' articles.

All of the above said, I myself would still vote 1999 America as a fairly wondrous time and place to be alive. (I'm sure Marjorie Wilcox and most of her contemporaries would agree.) If you are careful, and able to keep yourself and your children out of the cultural quicksand, there has never in history been a richer garden awaiting your seed. Our opportunities are enormous, and we have never been better protected from arbitrary vagaries (U.S. life expectancy was just 47 years when my grandmother was born).

Robert Frost (another of the individuals through whom we interpret the '90s) gave one of his poems the wonderful title: "Happiness Makes up in Height for What It Lacks in Length." I sometimes think one could apply a similar description to our current decade. For all of our disheartening problems, today's glorious moments are very glorious indeed.

The first two articles in our feature section—one by Richard Brookhiser and another by Bruce Thornton and Victor Hanson—set up our later material on the '90s rather nicely. For they are about one of the most un-'90s individuals in American history: George Washington, who died exactly 200 years ago in December. If the '90s are an era of hype and celebrity, Washington stood for the opposite qualities of quiet duty, modesty, decency, and selflessness. He was not gnawed by a hunger for power or fame.

At the same time, Washington was emphatically *not* the boring, wooden cipher most contemporary Americans take him to be. He was an aggressive, imaginative businessman who, at a time when agriculture was critical to America yet mired in subsistence-level backwardness in most places, imported new plant species, designed a complex round barn for grain-milling, and established big commercial fish-netting operations on the Potomac. He was an impressive athlete who could outride any contemporary on horseback, and a bold general at a time when generals commanded right at the front lines, often catching bullets in the process (Washington's clothes were ventilated on numerous occasions).

In an article in *Art Issues*, columnist Dave Hickey suggests the contemporary word which best captures Washington is *cool*. Hickey defines as cool a person who doesn't need to plead his beliefs, because he is able to embody them, in a simple, graceful way. He suggests it's less what Washington stood for that we admire than that

he simply stood, the embodiment of everything the republic might be.... My favorite Washington story concerns his deportment at the Second Continental Congress, which could never have been assembled without his guaranteed presence. Throughout the deliberations, the shouting and wrangling, the nitpicking and backbiting, Washington sat there, hands in his lap with his legs crossed, saying little or nothing. Occasionally, however, when the debate became especially heated or seemed to divagate from its purposes, Washington would shift his weight in his chair and cross his legs the other way and, at that moment, as if he had turned the tiller of the Ship of State, the debate would take a new direction. That, my friends, is cool.

Washington wasn't the only great American to embody this extraordinary mix of competence and humility. Robert E.

WHILE ON THE SURFACE OURS IS A PERIOD OF UNBRIDLED FREEDOM, IN THE MOST VITAL AREAS CITIZENS ARE OFTEN WRAPPED IN BUREAUCRATIC CHAINS.

Lee practiced a similar quiet stoicism, refusing his life long to grant a newspaper interview or write a memoir of his brilliant Civil War leadership, because that would be "trading on the blood of my men." A more recent American statesman who triumphed where brasher men failed—through the sheer force of his moral principles and strength of his confidence—was Ronald Reagan. His new biographer Edmund Morris makes it clear that while the hard masculine shell of simplified conviction that Reagan (like Washington) formed around his private life often made him a puzzle up close, it also made him an extremely potent leader. The very first print interview Morris granted to discuss his complex new book was with *TAE*'s John Meroney, and we present the biographer's fascinating comments on page 21.

The power-eschewing, limelight-avoiding decency of men like Washington, Lee, and Reagan is not gone from our public life. The impulse lives on in many nooks and crannies, deep within the personalities of particular Americans, even in our politics. A reassuring glimpse of it can be seen, for instance, in Bill Kauffman's profile of a present-day U.S. sachem whose Mount Vernon is in Alexander, New York, rather than Alexandria, Virginia. (See page 32.)

And the good news is, so long as this wholesome native selflessness endures, no American decade—whether the 1990s or the 2090s—will lack for nobility and accomplishment.



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IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

The Mistake of the Century. Yes, it's a C-word—but something bigger than Communism.

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AREOPAGITICA AND OTHER POLITICAL WRITINGS OF JOHN MILTON

Foreword by John Alvis

As poet, statesman, and pamphleteer, John Milton remains one of the singular champions of liberty in the annals of history. Even in his meditations on theology Milton strove to demonstrate that liberty—of conscience—is one of the inviolable rights of free peoples. In his theological writings he seeks to unite ancient philosophy and the authority of the Judeo-Christian scriptures to support the concept of free, republican government. During the crises that wracked English life and liberties during the seventeenth century, Milton's was one of the indispensable voices and pens. He published several revolutionary manifestos, two works defending regicide, and of course the famous *Areopagitica* or defense of freedom of expression and the press against censorship. John Alvis has collected into a superb one-volume edition all of Milton's political writings of enduring importance. These include the entirety of *Areopagitica*, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *A Defence of the People of England*, *The Second Defence of the People of England*, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, and *Mr. John Milton's Character of the Long Parliament*.

John Milton (1608–1674) was the author also of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and served as Latin secretary to Oliver Cromwell during the Commonwealth.

John Alvis is Professor of English at the University of Dallas and the Institute for Philosophic Studies.

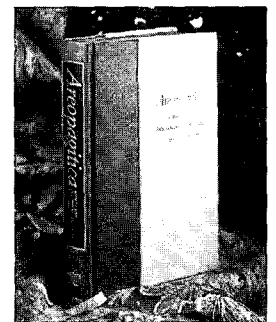
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Sidelights

Psychology professor **Philip Tetlock** collected predictions from over 200 "experts" over the past 12 years; those who said they were very sure of their predictions were wrong 65 percent of the time—an accuracy rate worse than a flipped coin would have provided. ♣ Only 16 percent of meals eaten at home last year were home-cooked, according to *World Watch*. ♣ **Buddy Roogow**, Maryland's lottery director, admits that winning the lottery is nearly impossible: "That's why we emphasize the fun of playing. A government body has to be socially responsible." ♣ Sixty-two percent of white, non-immigrant parents (compared to 28 percent of foreign-born parents) admitted they sometimes take their U.S. freedoms for granted, a Public Agenda poll found. ... Ninety-two percent of immigrant parents said it was important "for public schools that have a lot of immigrant students to concentrate on teaching these students about the heroes, traditions, and beliefs of the United States." ♣ An Iceland grocery chain opposed to genetically modified foods ran a picture of **Bill Clinton** over the caption, "The U.S. President doesn't care what you put in your mouth," the *Wall Street Journal* reports. ♣ PBS critic **Laurence Jarvik** notes that the nonprofit network's flagship Boston station, WGBH, has over 1,000 employees (100 in fundraising alone), more than Boston's ABC, CBS, and NBC stations combined. ♣ "An illegal immigrant from China appealed to a Hong Kong court for a longer sentence behind bars because he can make more money in prison in still-capitalist Hong Kong than he can working in the [socialist] mainland," reports *Heterodoxy*. ♣ In 1997-98, the number of students expelled for bringing guns to school declined by 31 percent, the U.S. Department of Education reports. Columbine "is an aberration," says **Wesley Mitchell**, chief of police for L.A.'s Unified School District. "We truly understand things are not getting worse. They are getting better." ... Most high school students say the nation's greatest problem is crime and violence, with declining families and morals the second greatest problem, according to a poll for the Horatio Alger Association. ... Over two-thirds of the students said religious activities are important to their success; four out of 10 public school students said other students' behavior interferes with their performance.

A Zogby poll of likely voters in the New York senate race found **Rudy Giuliani** beating **Hillary Clinton** by 50 percent to 36 percent among union members. ... A Skaneateles, New York restaurant has a Hillary sandwich: "Ingredients: Mostly baloney." ♣ Pundit **Paul Gigot** notes that Representative **Jim Rogan** (R-Calif.), previously believed to be the most endangered House impeachment manager, is enjoying massive financial support, with thousands of voters turning out for his reelection announcement. Gigot's moral of the story: "Politicians can ignore the polls, do the right thing, and still prosper." ♣ **Geraldo Rivera**, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News*, *CNN*, and *CBS* all reported the Clintonista claim that Whitewater witness **David Hale** was paid off by the President's enemies, but none of these outlets carried reports when the claim was shown to be false, the Media Research Center observes. ♣ A ground-breaking study of the Internet economy from the University of Texas discovered several startling facts: The Net created 1.2 million jobs in 1998 and generated revenues of \$301 billion, much larger than expected and roughly comparable to the size of the U.S. auto industry. Revenue per Net employee averaged \$250,000, compared to \$160,000 for non-Net workers. ... The American Management Association reports one out of three job-seekers in 1998 had insufficient language and/or math skills for the job they sought. ... The majority of American companies have been sued over employment-related matters, according to the Society for Human Resource Management and New York law firm Jackson Lewis. ... The rate at which workers voluntarily quit their jobs is the highest it's been in a decade; executive-search firms predict their revenues will be twice the 1993 level, the *Wall Street Journal* reports. ♣ The IRS says 142,500 people had adjusted gross incomes of \$1 million or more in 1997, up from 87,000 in 1995. ♣ When Texas recently granted a weekend sales-tax holiday, J.C. Penney stores saw their sales more than double. "People look at it as a way to dig into the government coffers," a store spokesman explained, "and people like to do that." ♣ San Francisco's City Hall recently became the nation's first to fly the homosexual rainbow flag. ♣ Tory philosopher **Roger Scruton** is being sued for damages by the Pet Shop Boys, a British rock group whose musicianship he criticized in a recent book. ♣ **Andree Conrad** of *Apparel Industry* magazine spots a new trend: exposed bra straps. "Even Mennonite girls are wearing [them] in church functions," she sighs. —SW

MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB.

