

If the success of home shopping portends the future, marketing will turn to ever more sophisticated attempts to play on our nostalgia for what we've lost, to peddle connections to other people via commerce. Home shopping fore-shadows what's so insidious about that prospect: even as QVC and HSN try to mimic the feeling of community, they draw us, as television always has, even further away from the real thing.

At six a.m., a woman named Doris phones HSN to purchase a portable copier for \$229. "How are you?" the host asks. "Fair," Doris replies, her voice shaking slightly. She explains that she orders things from home shopping and mail-order catalogues, forgets what she orders, and then orders them again. She wants the copier to keep track of her purchases.

"Good idea," the host says, smothering her pathos with his enthusiasm. "And running down to the corner copier is so inconvenient."

Doris will have her copier. And she will be yoked even more tightly to an isolation that only her television—and another purchase—can penetrate.

From "Lonely Hearts, Classy Dreams, Empty Wallets," June 1995. Amy Waldman is now a contributing editor at the Atlantic, and is at work on her first novel.

TA-NEHISI COATES ON BILL CLINTON

After leaving the Oval Office in 2001, Bill Clinton launched a foundation to tackle global woes like AIDS and climate change, and opened an office in Harlem to much fanfare. Ta-Nehisi Coates took the occasion to plumb the black community's love affair with the nation's forty-second president.

Bill Clinton's scandals were supposed to end on January 20. But days after leaving office, he was taking hits for his late-night pardon of financier fugitive Marc Rich, and for absconding with White House furniture. Congress was threatening to pull the

plug on his plans for a pricey New York office suite, and Wall Street firms were canceling his speaking engagements. Other people might have buckled under the pressure and checked themselves into the Bali Hilton just to get away from it all.

But what did Clinton do? He went to Harlem, the capital of black America and, as such, the best place for the scandal-fatigued to find redemption. Harlem didn't disappoint; it gave Clinton a welcome befitting a war hero. As he strolled the neighborhood, people screamed, "We love you," and "Touch my hand." Clinton lunched on Creole cuisine at the Bayou, where a busboy told the *Baltimore Sun*, "I never wanted Clinton to leave office."

There is a long and storied history of men of dubious repute finding acquittal in the black community. Often this is because of a deep résumé of political activism. Adam Clayton Powell's womanizing never threatened his mastery of Harlem. The FBI managed to record the most intimate details of Martin Luther King Jr.'s philandering, yet to this day many black Americans dismiss King's extramarital lapses as a hoax conspired by his enemies. When Marion Barry was caught on tape smoking crack, many African American men in Washington began sporting T-shirts exclaiming, "The bitch set him up." The story of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, with his love child and illicit payments to his mistress, is the most recent installment in these chronicles.

Even men of negligible political significance have found the black community a welcome haven. O. J. Simpson spent his entire professional life ducking black people and trying to ingratiate himself with whites. But when he was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife, you would have thought black America had won the lottery. After Mike Tyson was accused of rape, he received the backing of the National Baptist Convention USA, the largest black organization in the world. It mattered little that the woman Tyson was later convicted of raping was a black Baptist Sunday school teacher.

Tyson and Simpson showed that neither psychological instability nor outright rejection of black America could curb its loyalties to its prodigal sons. But Clinton trumps all comers. He is the first white person to gain entry into black America's house of repentant sinners.

Clinton won his ghetto pass by cultivating an image as the best friend black America has ever had in the White House. While I am in a small minority, especially in black America, I have never bought into this image of Clinton. I was deeply disappointed with his record in the criminal justice arena, where blacks have been disproportionately affected by the prison boom that occurred on his watch and left one out of every three black men without the right to vote. Most of Clinton's attempts at racial conciliation seemed to me little more than television crusades—a perception only compounded by his January *New York Times* column urging Bush to implement all the things he failed to do, such as equalizing the penalties for crack and powder cocaine possession.

Little of this, though, affected black public opinion, which was shaped by more potent symbols. Clinton installed a record number of African Americans in his cabinet and spoke



about race with a frankness that black America was not used to hearing from a white person, much less the head of the free world. Clinton's tour of Africa and subsequent apology for the epoch of European colonization and enslavement may have been halfhearted, but they were much more than black people had ever seen from a white person in power.

Clinton's economic policies were also a boon for African Americans, whose median income reached an all-time high during his administration, even as poverty among blacks plummeted thanks in large part to his increases in the minimum wage and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

But Clinton's true appeal lay in his ability to raise the blood temperature of white conservatives. Every time Bob Novak harrumphed on CNN, or Dan Burton dismissed Clinton as a scumbag, black America invoked the "enemy of my enemy" formula and deduced that Clinton must be doing something right.

Moreover, Clinton was the first president who seemed truly comfortable around African Americans. George Mason University professor Roger Wilkins says, "I have never seen another president—as a matter of fact, I have seen very few white people who are as at ease with black people as him. He genuinely likes black people, and blacks can sense that. And there is a part of him that seems genuinely interested in achieving equality in America."

Less appreciated, however, is the way Clinton meshes with some of the

unseemly aspects of black identity. In 1998, when Toni Morrison asserted that Clinton was "our first black president," she was roundly—and rightly—blasted for invoking an assortment of stereotypes to bolster her argument. Yet there is a place in African American iconography for men like Bill Clinton.

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In many ways, African American culture celebrates scoundrels. The glorification of drug dealers is not the result of hip-hop as much as its heritage. Before gangsta rap, there were blaxploitation flicks making heroic legends out of criminals. Before that, there were the toasts, African American oral poetry that celebrated the hustler. The way Clinton manages to outslick his adversaries, smooth-talk his constituents, and womanize while he's at it puts him squarely in a celebrated African American tradition of tricksters and players.

Clinton's qualification for the African American rogues gallery has earned him a few choice honorifics rarely bestowed on white people. In private conversations among blacks, Clinton is ghetto, a nigga (not nigger, mind you)—terms that say: He is one of us. The way Clinton straight-housed official White House furniture only adds credence to the description. In the eyes of black America, Clinton is Pimping Sam gone white trash, or Shine holding court in the White House. After all, not even Marion Barry could top getting a blow job in the Oval Office.

From "Soul Mates," April 2001. Ta-Nehisi Coates is now a contributing editor and blogger at the Atlantic.

JOSHUA MICAH MARSHALL ON RADICAL ISLAM

Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Washington Monthly contributing writer Joshua Micah Marshall warned that liberal intellectuals, like their conservative counterparts, were overestimating their ideological enemies in the Middle East.

May you live, as the Chinese curse has it, in interesting times. For the last eighteen months, we've all been living in "interesting times"—often frightfully so. Yet for intellectuals there is always a craving that times would be ... well, just a little more interesting.

That's been especially true for the last half century because a shadow has hung over political intellectuals in the English-speaking world, and in some respects throughout the West. It is the shadow of the ideological wars (and the blood-and-iron wars) that grew out of World War I—from communism, to fascism, appeasement, vital-center liberalism, and the rest of it. Even as these struggles congeal into history, their magnitude and seriousness hardly diminish. Understanding fascism, understanding that it could be neither accommodated nor appeased, understanding that Soviet communism was rather like fascism—these were much more than examples of getting things right or of demonstrating intellectual courage and moral seriousness. These insights, decisions, and moments of action came to define those qualities.

Since then, things have never been quite the same. Like doctors who want to treat the most challenging patients or cops who want to take down the worst criminals, it's only natural for people who think seriously about political and moral issues to seek out the most challenging and morally vexing questions to ponder and confront. Yet, since the Cold War hit its middle period in the late 1950s, nothing has really quite compared.

September 11 changed all that. Al-Qaeda's war on America and America's



THE WELL-WIRED WAR ROOM

After the dot-com bubble burst, many pundits and politicians believed that the prospect of the Internet revolutionizing politics had burst with it. "The Internet is Tinkertoys," declared Jim Jordan, the head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

But the *Washington Monthly's* Nicholas Thompson argued that "[f]or savvy candidates, the Internet has become the new political machine." All the attention paid to the Web's bells and whistles, Thompson wrote in "Machined Politics" (May 2002), had obscured the potential for the less-sexy opportunities it offered—its efficiencies of organization and communication—to become a potent political tool in the right hands. The use of the online tactics he identified would prove to be one of the decisive factors in Obama's 2008 victory.