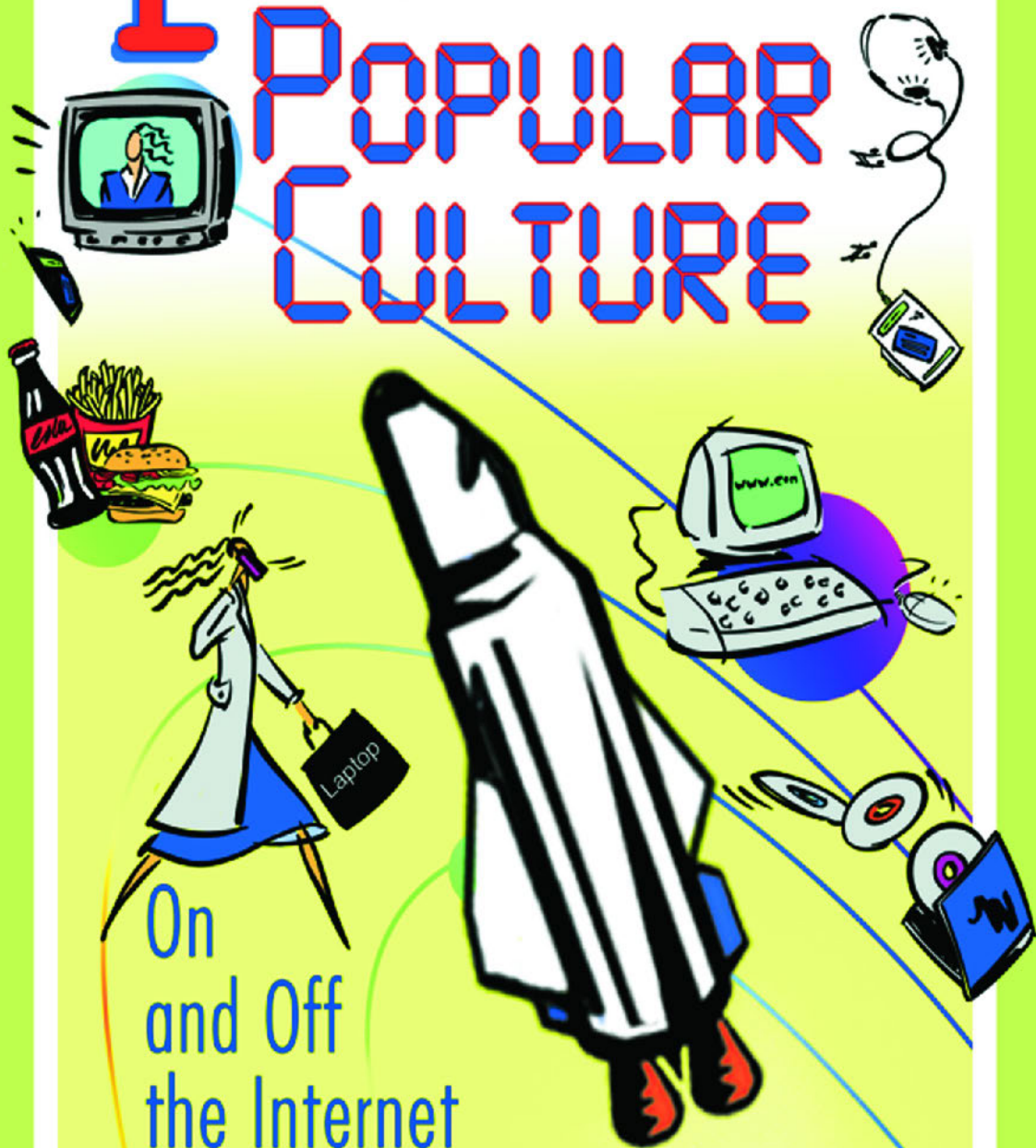


PROBING POPULAR CULTURE



On
and Off
the Internet

Marshall Fishwick

Foreword by Tom Wolfe

Marshall Fishwick, PhD

Probing Popular Culture On and Off the Internet



*Pre-publication
REVIEWS,
COMMENTARIES,
EVALUATIONS . . .*

"Marshall Fishwick's *Probing Popular Culture* is a learned and, at the same time, readable volume. If you had any illusions about popular culture icons such as Paul Bunyan, Henry Ford, or Joe Magarac, they'll be gone after reading this book.

Fishwick strengthens his book with a section on 'other voices,' including a chapter by Ray B. Browne, one of the founders and stalwarts of popular culture studies. In that same section, a high school teacher adds comments about the approach of teenagers and teachers to new technology, and an anthropologist contributes an interesting piece on 'the realm of Splogia.'

As in his other work, Fishwick roams widely over art, architecture, religion, politics, music, and technology. For those who have an interest in using this material in class or in going further in the subjects covered, Fishwick includes an appendix on electronic resources, a good section on further reading, and notes for each of the chapters covered."

Marvin Wachman, PhD
President Emeritus, Temple University

"Marshall Fishwick, through his wit, insights, and questions, probes into the current state of popular culture. But he also ponders its future in a world of ever-changing technology, globalization, and international tensions and crises. After surveying the origins and rise of popular culture interests and studies, he looks around the contemporary scene, back to some of our heroes, myth-makers, and public figures, and ahead to the future.

Fishwick's writing style holds our attention and his constant questions force us to take a fresh look at popular culture as it moves into the twenty-first century. His 'petite probes' at the end of the book 'frost and decorate' his work, and the essays by other writers complement Fishwick's probing of popular culture for our times. Interested persons, students, and scholars will profit from reading these essays and articles by one of the founding fathers of popular culture studies. Fishwick blends his experiences, travels, and knowledge to explain and to ruminate on where we are and where we are headed. We need more like him to help us understand our society, our popular culture, and our future."

Roy T. Matthews, PhD
Professor Emeritus, Department of History,
Michigan State University



More pre-publication

REVIEWS, COMMENTARIES, EVALUATIONS . . .

"In the early years of a new century, it is appropriate to try to make sense of our dynamic popular culture, and no one is better equipped to do this than Marshall Fishwick. One of the founders of the popular culture movement, Fishwick has been at the center of cultural study for more than five decades, providing insightful commentary on the things that matter most in our lives: our history, heroes, lifestyles, religion, arts, and technologies. In *Probing Popular Culture*, Fishwick demonstrates his grasp of how the various elements of our popular culture co-exist, sometimes smoothly and sometimes at odds, how they have developed over time, and what they mean. Impressive in its sweep, the book leaves no aspect of our culture unexamined.

Fishwick looks both admiringly and critically at the culture of the people, reminding us that 'popular culture is at the heart of revolutions.' He urges all of us not to dismiss its importance, and after reading this book, we never will. Written in a lively, readable style characterized by rhetorical questions, *Probing Popular Culture* engages readers from the start, compelling them to think."

Kathy Merlock Jackson, PhD

Editor, *The Journal of American Culture*;
Past-President, American Culture
Association

"Marshall Fishwick dissects vernacular folkways throughout the Global Village—on and off the Internet, in and out of bounds, up and down the pike. In the shelfful of books he has published over the past five de-

cadés, Fishwick helped to make popular the study of popular culture. In his new book he probes the immediate past—the twentieth century—asking a thousand questions of it that the twenty-first century will need to answer."

Charles Boewe, PhD

Former Director of Fulbright Foundations
in Iran, Pakistan, and India

"This book offers an extraordinary range of information, ideas, and insights. Fishwick makes it clear that this is a book about popular culture, and early in the book he announces his intent: 'My goal is simple: to set minds working and tongues wagging.' Surely in this he succeeds."

Harry B. Adams, MDiv, HonDD

Horace Bushnell Professor Emeritus
of Christian Nurture,
Yale University Divinity School

"Marshall Fishwick has done it again. *Probing Popular Culture* is an extraordinary feat. An exhilarating collection of short, vignette-like chapters with an incredible range, he has established that there is a new form of culture, one that combines great technical sophistication with a Rude Boy atmosphere. Fishwick's grasp of the subject is at once awe-inspiring and magnetic. Get this book."

Daniel Walden, PhD

Professor Emeritus of American Studies,
English and Comparative Literature,
Penn State University

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Probing Popular Culture

On and Off the Internet

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Probing Popular Culture

On and Off the Internet

Marshall Fishwick, PhD



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For all my students,
who over several student
generations, have taught me
more than I have taught them,
and who keep in touch.

I grope, I probe, I listen, I test until the tumblers fall and I'm in.

Marshall McLuhan

PROBE: from Latin, *probare*—to try or test. In late Latin, also an examination. To search into, to explore, to discover or ascertain something; to pierce or to penetrate.

The Oxford English Dictionary

Your question has probed through to the pith of our belief.

George Eliot, 1878

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marshall Fishwick, PhD, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Director of the American Studies and Popular Culture programs at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, holds several honorary degrees and teaching awards. Dr. Fishwick is the author of *Heroes and Superheroes*; *Symbolism*; *Revitalizing the Humanities*; *An American Mosaic: Rethinking American Culture History*, *Great Awakenings: Popular Religion and Popular Culture*; *Popular Culture: Cavespace to Cyberspace*; and *Popular Culture in a New Age* as well as many others. Fishwick serves as advisory editor to the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the *Journal of American Culture* and is cofounder of the journal *International Popular Culture*. In 2000, Dr. Fishwick authored a “Millennium Edition” of *Go and Catch a Falling Star* as well as articles about the millennium and the controversial “global village.”

In 1998, he was honored by the American Culture Association (ACA) with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Dr. Fishwick is cofounder of the Popular Culture Association (PCA) and has served as its president. A Fulbright Distinguished Professor in Denmark, Italy, Germany, Korea, and India, he helped establish the American Studies Research Center in Hyderabad, India, which now houses the largest collection of American books in Asia. Dr. Fishwick has recently been appointed Senior Editor of Haworth’s Popular Culture & American Studies book program.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ray B. Browne helped found the Popular Culture Association and also founded the *Journal of Popular Culture*. He has written and edited dozens of books and articles and is a major voice in academia.

James Combs retired from teaching early to become a full-time author. He has written many books and articles and continues to teach a seminar on popular films. He lives near Abingdon, Virginia.

Katherine Lynde is an enthusiastic high school teacher, and one with major interest in popular culture and pedagogy. She teaches honor sections in Blacksburg High School in Virginia.

Foreword

Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* had a "glittering eye," a term that fascinated me for years, since I had never seen such a thing and couldn't imagine what it looked like. Then one day I met Marshall Fishwick. I was in my junior year at Washington and Lee when Marshall arrived as a young teacher fresh out of the American Studies doctoral program at Yale. One look at him in the classroom—and no question about it, there it was, he had it, the Mariner's orb. It blazed away. It dazzled. It lit up courses such as no one had ever encountered at Washington and Lee or any other school.

Coleridge's Mariner was a monomaniac, determined to tell everybody a single story. Marshall was the reverse, an omnimaniac. His scholarly interest knew no bounds, and he was determined to *teach it all*. His *pièce de résistance* was an extraordinary omnibus course in American intellectual history. He covered American philosophical thought, American psychological theory, theology, historiography, scientific method, the works—all with the glittering eye and a glistening smile that seemed to come not so much from down-home happiness as from the exhilaration of the quest for knowledge and the challenge of getting it through our skulls.

He was the most magnetic teacher I had ever known, and as soon as I left Washington and Lee I headed for the American Studies program at Yale in hopes of acquiring the same Dionysian sweep myself. But of course Marshall was, to borrow Huey Long's phrase, *sui generis*. I have followed his career over the decades since then with a growing admiration, through his thirty books, and his innumerable articles, monographs, and newspaper columns. I have also made a point of keeping up with his amazing classroom performances. Lately I have gone to see him in action at Virginia Tech—and I have watched the glittering eye and the glistening smile entrancing another fortunate generation of undergraduates.

All the while, Marshall's interests have continued to expand, much the way old-fashioned (last year's) physicists believe the universe does. One of his latter-day pursuits has been the study of popular cul-

ture, a subject big enough and broad enough even for him. It was Matthew Arnold who coined the term *culture* as a word referring to the arts and literature. Culture, he believed (along with Max Weber and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal), would play an increasingly important role in modern society. In fact, he argued, it had already given rise to a fourth social class, joining the traditional upper class ("the Barbarians," Arnold called them), the middle class ("the Philistines"—another Arnold coinage), and the lower class ("the Populace"—not even in the nineteenth century did intellectuals dare be so incorrect as to dream up funny names for the bottom dogs). To this new class, this fourth class, the "culture" class, he gave the cumbersome name of "the people of sweetness and light." ("Sweetness and light": yet another Arnold coinage, along with "commuter," meaning a poor drudge who goes back and forth from a small town to the big city in order to toil.) Sweetness and light were all that were required to join the new class, but to Arnold it was axiomatic that such dulcet and luscious creatures could be produced only by Oxford and Cambridge or their equivalents, if any. In other words, culture, while not the property of the merely moneyed classes (the Barbarians and the Philistines) nevertheless belonged to an elite.

In the United States, however, particularly in the second half century, people definitely not of the Oxford cut have developed a new form of "culture," one that often combines great technical sophistication with a Rude Boy mental atmosphere. Its works and its influence have become well nigh unavoidable. It is known as Popular Culture. It has become such a big part of modern life, one can no longer rule it outside the boundaries of scholarly attention. Bringing it inside has proved to be a severe test of academic rigor. It also demands scholars of unprecedented range, powers of synthesis, and, not least of all, energy. What is to be done?

Fellow students, I give you Marshall Fishwick.

Tom Wolfe

Preface

The people are a giant Atlas, carrying the world on their shoulders. How and why do they do it? To ask such questions will always be popular culture's first task.

Marshall Fishwick

Marshall Fishwick, a founding father of Popular Culture studies, has set the tone and pace of that major movement. This is a splendid summary of what he thinks and knows in our new millennium.

During the turmoil of the 1960s, he was an early pioneer in American Studies, receiving his doctorate at Yale University under Professor Ralph Gabriel. Fishwick began American Studies programs at Washington and Lee University and Lincoln University before joining with Professors Ray B. Browne and Russel B. Nye in 1967 to start the Popular Culture Association, which would both broaden and deepen cultural studies and break down the constricting boundaries of well-entranced departments. The idea caught fire and has burned brightly ever since. Two major journals—*The Journal of Popular Culture* and *The Journal of American Culture*—are the flagships, and scores of books from the Popular Press are the legacy. This book is a distillation of that pioneering and these triumphs.

A graduate of Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia, Fishwick believes, with Jefferson, that if you give the people light, they will find their way. He also agrees that it is the great multitude for whom all really great things are done, said, suffered. The multitude desires the best of everything and in the long run is the best judge of it. Fishwick also knows there is truth in P. T. Barnum's famous cynical remark: "There's a sucker born every minute." He gives suckers a local habitation and a name.

In an earlier book, he explained, "Why not put our trust in Electronic Darwinism?" Rather than curtail or restrict information, let it all flow and then trust our great parents, Mother Nature and Father Time, to sort it all out. The silly and stupid must be discarded, the sig-

nificant will be retained. In a democracy, we must trust the people to judge, as eventually they will. Here, indeed, is an ex-elitist's trust in the people.

Every thinking American is concerned about how the media are shaping our daily lives. Too often, the answers of scholars are delivered in jargon-ridden studies which—when closely examined—signify little or nothing. In contrast, *Probing Popular Culture* is an entertaining and mature work which will make sense to the college student, the general reader, and the specialist. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson talked about the “pursuit of happiness.” At the time—and later—there have been varying interpretations of what he meant in that vague phrase. In this direct and informative overview, a scholarly founding father shows how popular culture studies have become a way to understand how ordinary people find meaning and joy in their lives. The result is nothing less than a better understanding of who we are and who we should become. I can think of no more humanistic endeavor—can you?

Peter Rollins

Acknowledgments

I owe so much to so many that I could fill a chapter—thank you to my teachers and benefactors. My family put my education above all else, and gave us opportunities my parents never had. I took the “classical course route” at a fine high school, and had excellent mentors at the University of Virginia, the University of Wisconsin, and Yale University, and I shall never forget them. Mine is a helpful profession.

Those that shaped me and set the tone of my life include Sally Lovelace, James Southall Wilson, Peters Rushton, A. K. Davis, Merle Curti, Ralph Gabriel, Arnold Toynbee, Whitney Griswald, and James G. Leyburn.

Marvin Wachman and Ray Browne, who still befriend and guide me, ventured into new fields, such as popular culture, and are dear in my heart.

Former students, such as Tom Wolfe, Roger Mudd, Carl Barnes, and Roy Matthews have shown me how a new generation makes new advances; thus do one’s students become his teachers.

A number of critics and editors have helped me get the spoken word into print. Norman Cousins opened the pages of the *Saturday Review* to me, as have a series of generous editors at home and abroad.

At the Haworth Press, which has published my more recent books, I owe much to Patricia Brown, Peg Marr, and Bill Palmer. For my shortcomings I must take all the blame.



The author and the Colonel welcome you.

Introduction

Welcome to the Twenty-First Century

Fasten your seat belt. It's going to be a bumpy trip. It already has been, since the big ball came down in Times Square at midnight, January 1, 2000. No one expected then what lay ahead.

Has any age come in with the hip-hype hurrah of the New Millennium? On January 1, 2000, the whole world entered the celebration mode. Millions of dollars supported parades, light shows, special editions, concerts, extravaganzas, and fireworks lit up the skies from Fiji to Fredonia. *Bring on Utopia!*

After all, no one alive had ever welcomed a new millennium before; and no one would live to see the next one in 3000 A.D. The chance of a lifetime! Ring out wild bells! The opening of a New Age!

Nowhere was the celebration more long and lavish than in the United States. "We pulled out all the stops"; politicians, pollsters, the media, and people everywhere lit the skies and their homes on January 1, 2000. The dawn of a new millennium! After the euphoria, Americans returned to the task they relish most: electing a president and many other candidates at all levels. The ensuing presidential race was fierce, and (like eight other presidential elections before it) saw the candidate with the most popular votes (Al Gore) denied that honor by the electoral college. The Founding Fathers had made sure this was a Republic, rather than a Democracy. The U.S. Supreme Court, in a 7-2 decision on December 12, reversed a Florida Supreme Court decision ordering the hand recounts of thousands of votes, which gave George Bush his razor-thin election.

The year that had begun with free-flowing confetti ended with uncountable disputed ballots and pregnant chads.

The presidential election was so close that the final outcome depended on who had won Florida. The electoral apparatus apparently broke down, and the results were inconclusive. The fact that George Bush's brother was governor of Florida added a disquieting detail.

Was the election fair? Might the nightmare be repeated in the 2004 election?

For many, the contested election results have never been accepted. In many other areas the complacency of the 1990s evaporated, as much of the optimism and joy that heralded the New Day seemed to disappear. The Middle East was in shambles, with blood all over the ground where the Prince of Peace once walked. The West had failed to bring any workable truce in the equally bloody Balkans, and years of threatening Saddam Hussein and his rogue nation of Iraq proved futile when he drove the arms inspectors out of his country. All over the globe, weary disappointed peacekeepers were anxious to go home. Muslim anger mounted.

AIDS, Ebola, corruption, and tribal outbursts swept through Africa and Asia. In 2001 our economic bubble finally burst. Stock markets around the globe tumbled, as Bears chased the Bulls out of Wall Street and high-tech stocks reached all-time lows.

Still, most Americans seemed pleased after a decade of prosperity, and expected it to return quickly. Didn't we have the strongest economy in the world, and weren't these little setbacks part of the whole system? Was the bubble of the 1990s about to burst? Yes. It came like a thief, in what might turn out to be the determining event of our generation, even our century.

It burst with a terrible bang on September 11, 2001. On that day came the shock heard round the world: the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, by terrorist hijackers, with our own commercial planes, fueled for long flights and carrying thousands of gallons of high octane fuel. The result was thousands of deaths and injuries and the end of the myth of our invulnerability. Our two oceans, which had protected the homeland for centuries, could not protect us from this kind of attack that was launched in the skies above our own soil. Many likened 9/11 to the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt had called "a day that would live in infamy." We shall revisit 9/11 later in this book.

If that date created thousands of victims, it also gave us thousands of new heroes, such as the firefighters, police officers, and thousands of volunteers who risked their lives attempting to save others. Stature of some politicians soared, most notably Mayor Giuliani of New York City and President George W. Bush.

Some have called post-9/11 America the land of the New Fear. Will we be attacked again? When? How? A poll in 2002 indicated that three out of four New Yorkers feared there would be another attack.

The events of 9/11 set off a ripple effect of problems and setbacks that would continue for many months, such as decline in consumer confidence, rising unemployment, and bankruptcies. By 2003 over 200,000 jobs were lost. Our continuing economic decline would bring the stock market, by October 2002, to its lowest point since the Great Depression.

On October 2, 2002, a window was shot out in Aspen Hill, Maryland, and a man was killed in nearby Wheaton. On a bloody October 3, five people, three men and two women, were ambushed and shot, four in Maryland, one in Washington, DC. A serial killer was on the loose. Ballistic tests indicated .223 caliber bullets from the same high-powered rifle were used. The rampage continued.

Panic gripped the area. Killings continued, reaching down into Virginia. The tarot card "Death" was found, inscribed "I am God." A later note demanded \$10 million, then a phone call: "Your children are not safe." Panic spread, schools closed, stores emptied.

America's most extraordinary manhunt, involving thousands of police, troops, airplanes, and journalists ended on October 24. An army veteran John Allen Muhammad and a Jamaican teenager, Lee Boyd Malvo, thought to be Muhammad's stepson, were arrested and in 2003 were tried and convicted. In 2004 their final fate was still to be determined, pending the outcome of court appeals.

Not all our new century problems came from abroad, nor from terrorists. Some grew out of the very thing we cherished most, the world's most advanced and efficient technology. We led the Electronic Revolution—until the lights went out.

On a sultry summer afternoon—August 14, 2003—America was stunned by the biggest blackout in U.S. history. It rolled instantly across a swath of the northern United States and southern Canada, driving millions outdoors into rush-hour streets; shutting down nuclear power plants; trapping people in buildings and subways; and closing airports.

How could and did it happen? No one seemed to know. All President Bush could say was "We'll find out why it happened and we'll deal with the problem."

How long did the disaster take? It happened in about nine seconds, blocking 10 percent of electricity east of the Rocky Mountains. Could it be restored that fast? No, for if an outage is restored too quickly, it causes another system failure.

One recalls Henry Adams's great study: "The Dynamo and the Virgin." Once we put our faith in the church; now, Adams noted, we put it in electricity. The wire in our hand might not enlighten, but electrocute us. Technology might well prove to be the god that failed.

In December 2003 a rash of sniper killings erupted on Interstate 70 outside Columbus, Ohio. Again, an army of investigators had not found the killers as the year ended. Was this a portent of a new kind of problem for twenty-first-century America, and perhaps of the world?

Far away, on the idyllic island paradise of Bali, a peaceful tourist haven, on October 12, a pair of bombings turned paradise into an inferno, killing 202 people and wounding hundreds more. This worst attack in Indonesia's history turned suspicion to al-Qaida and an affiliated group, Jemaah Islamiyah. What frightened Americans was that the attacks were near the second anniversary of the al-Qaida-linked attack on the USS *Cole* off Yemen, which occurred October 13, 2000, and led to the closure of U.S. embassies and renewed terrorist alerts for Americans. The Global Village was exploding.

War clouds darkened the horizon. Congress approved military action against Iraq, despite much opposition. We stood on the brink of World War III.

Life in the twenty-first century finds us on a roller coaster: ups and downs to take our breath away and leave the whole world gasping. All the old truisms may be false; our two oceans offer no protection, and there is no place to hide. Everything nailed down is coming loose.

We live by instant issues, threats, posters, and protests. We seem to be for and against so many things that we find most issues muddled. Just what are the issues? Whose side are we really on? Why are our former allies defecting? Why are we so hated by so many?

Plagued by earthbound problems, we move into outer space. The costs are enormous, and so far, the results are questionable. Our astronauts transmit back pictures of earth—a small orb floating in a cosmic sea.

Why do so few people vote, or cope? Are we sacrificing civil rights for the terrorist threat? And are the terrorists succeeding not only here but around the world?

Where can we find new wellsprings of energy and faith? Can we find new heroes now that so many old ones are discredited? Can we clear out the junk not only from our attics and highways, but also from our minds? Civilize technopolis and make cities livable?

I do not imply that our end is near; but our utopian dream of turning the globe into a free-trade shopping mall, commanded by dollar diplomacy, monitored by computers and technology, may be yet another utopian dream. Evidence keeps mounting that nationalism, tribalism, and localism are growing stronger, not weaker. What happens, in the new electronic takeover, to the needs of primary groups, subgroups, and traditional communities? Look at the situation in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and despair. Not only financial panic but balkanization are epidemic.

In short, our post-Cold War predictions and actions were too simplistic and superficial. They underestimated the power of tradition, local autonomy, and local memory. Most people in the world still live as did their ancestors, in tribal, local, or national patterns, and want to continue to live that way.

True, an elite has grabbed the technology (and often the profits) of the Information Age. But most people—the so-called “common folk”—expect to live and be buried close to where they were born. They cannot watch CBS or CNN to keep up with their local news.

But doesn't the spread and instant availability of world news unite people? Professor Colin Cherry at the University of London thinks not. It is grossly naive to assume that expanding and consolidating world communication will lead to peace and understanding. He writes, “Our new instant communication network may drive us apart emotionally just as it is drawing us together institutionally. Instead of new friends, we get new enemies.”

Bombings of the USS *Cole*, our African embassies, 9/11, and threats from many Muslim groups underscore this point. National differences of religion, ideology, and geography are very deep. Whenever new intrusions or intruders violate our sense of time, place, and history—or even our self-interest—we resist them. We found this out when we “civilized” Native Americans. Their sense of resentment seems to be happening globally.

It's easy to change artifacts, difficult to change human nature. We say we will wire the world. How does this sound to the people, nations, and tribes being wired?

A YEAR OF SCANDAL. The Associated Press story about 2002 sums it up this way: Perp walks and handcuffs. Investigations and indictments. Look back at the highlights of 2002 and many of the images that come to mind suggest a police lineup.

Scandal topped the news in 2002. It swamped legendary companies, reshaped the political agenda, and triggered a crisis of credibility. A wide survey of U.S. newspaper and broadcast editors chose the implosion of WorldCom the year's biggest story, with the nation's limping economy a close second. Many top stories, from airline woes to interest rates, remained as the old year ended.

How big was the WorldCom scandal? It involved \$11 billion in improper accounting, triggering the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. Hundreds of employees were left jobless, without benefits. A chain reaction followed, involving rising unemployment and charges against many major corporations, such as Tyco, whose chairman's wildly expensive purchases included a \$6,000 shower curtain.

Eleven interest cuts by the Federal Reserve didn't help much. The stock markets finished their third year of consecutive losses. This had not occurred in over six decades.

One fine quality of Americans, as the new century unfolds, is that they are still able to laugh at themselves and their problems. They know Mark Twain was right: human nature is widely distributed in the human race, and we can expect the unexpected. Many ups and downs occurred in 2003, but as the year ended, ups held the stage. In November the economy posted an 8.2 percent growth, and the Dow Jones Industrial average broke through 10,000. A new Medicare prescription benefit bill was passed by Congress, and holiday shopping and spending soared.

But the best news of all came by surprise on December 14, 2003. American troops found and arrested Saddam Hussein, hidden in a spider hole outside Tikrit. Coalition Administrator L. Paul Bremer announced the news that rocked the world: "We got him!"

New life and hope emerged as we moved forward into 2004. Old problems remained, but the twenty-first century held new hope and promise.

Notes from the Backbench

The outs and ins will always be with us. The ins sit up front, the proud majority; the outs, loyal opposition, go to the backbench. Democracies have always striven to protect outsiders who see and challenge things the insiders ignore. They are the watchdogs of democracy, as in the British Parliament. Many of our greatest leaders, such as William Pitt and Winston Churchill, have sat on the backbench, awaiting their term. Americans have had a continuous flow of backbenchers, including Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the moment long-dominant Democrats sit on the backbench in America. They are being heard, loud and clear.

Intellectuals and academicians have their backbench too. I discovered this when I entered Yale University, and chose to sit with professors such as Ralph Gabriel, Whitney Griswold, John Sirjamaki, and Norman Holmes Pearson. I had assumed I would join the front bench, the strong traditional disciplines, such as English, history, and the classics. Instead, I found new companions in American studies, sociology, and popular culture. They, alas, are gone now. But those of us who heard them still follow them. They taught their own outsiders who had come in: Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Max Weber, Karl Marx, William Faulkner. They believed we should not shut doors but take off the hinges. We are still working at it. What a splendid time to be a backbencher!

So what if Americans are too fat, too self-centered, too chauvinistic, too addicted to bigness? We admit it. Take for example, the bloated SUVs that roam our highways and guzzle huge amounts of gas.

I have a June 1, 2003, pseudo news release from Detroit about the forthcoming Ford Exorbitant, which seats fifty comfortably, has a full kitchen, three bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, and a Ford Explorer (the current super SUV) as a spare.

Why not give up living in your home and move into your Exorbitant, the announcement, put out by BBspot, suggests? There are nu-

merous advantages. In emergencies, you can always use your spare Ford Explorer. Since your Exorbitant is nuclear, getting 70,000 miles per enriched uranium rod, all should go well. This is most reassuring. Isn't half a million dollars a small price to get peace of mind?

Theories of energy, matter, space, and time are in flux. What was once held as simple has become incredibly complex. Information fights disinformation, smut doubles with glut. Millions of terminals all over the world send messages with the speed of light. Each terminal has memory and editing power. Anything and everything goes. Data data everywhere and not a chance to think.

Communication is becoming *com*munication: the linking of computers, fiber optics, satellites, and the new toy of the month. Once all the world was a stage. Soon it will be a mall.

Who benefits from new technologies, mergers, buyouts? Will a new overclass usurp most of the power? Will those unfamiliar or hostile to the new electronic wizardry become a new underclass—undervalued, underemployed, and unemployable?

Revolutionary changes are always frightening, especially for those raised in the earlier print culture. We know how much earlier technologies—such as the automobile, television, nuclear power—raised grave concerns. We also know that some of those concerns were justified. The automobile, television, and nuclear power plants have raised problems—few if any anticipated or understood. The earlier wild euphoria has disappeared.

Surely we don't want to halt the flow of information, any more than we want to deny the many obvious advantages of technology. New "wonder drugs" are indeed wonderful; we have advantages undreamed of even a generation ago.

Is big better? Is biggest best? Who will arbitrate and regulate the Electronic Revolution? Who will protect our basic privacy? Is anything too slanderous, libelous, or pornographic to be excluded or censored? Do our honored doctrines of free speech and free press fit the electronic media? Where do we draw the line between the silly and the significant, the truth and the hype, the new and the neurotic?

As in the ancient parliamentary model, we are the loyal opposition, occupying the backbench, but expecting—even demanding—to be heard. If, as we believe, the world is out of joint, we must say so, and take our stand.

I'll Take My Stand is an important book published in 1930, by a group known as the Southern Agrarians. They believed and fought for a Southern regional tradition, heritage, and “way of life” which was under attack, largely by Americans who championed consumer capitalism and massification. The battlefield is global now; and those “taking their stand” now come from all corners of that globe. They still fear the consumer capitalism which would turn our wonderfully diverse planet into a standardized Global Village. They still fear a crass mass culture that champions conformity while praising diversity. They see the computer as the avant garde of dangerous trends, and refuse to let it dehumanize us. We are not ciphers. We are neither “0s” nor “1s” on the silicon chips and will not be computerized. Our world is neither black nor white but full of infinite numbers of grays. Postmodern psychobabble must not lure us into treacherous uncharted waters.

We intend to re-do old injunctions. Thinkers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chips.

* * *

My goal is simple: to set minds working and tongues wagging. I think of popular culture as a topic of, by, and for the people—hence, of concern to everyone. Of course, everyone will not agree with what I say, or how I say it. That’s where the wagging tongues come in. I hope my words will open up a dialogue, and that it will continue long after this book is closed or even forgotten.

It has many facets, like a diamond, and can well be subversive and explosive. Fun and games? Scorn may be mixed with the fun, and the games can be deadly serious. Popular culture is at the heart of revolutions. Great revolutions slip in on cat’s feet. Those most affected by them, the elite and the mighty, seldom see them coming. Popular culture sees and hears, being close to the people. If the medium is the message, then the reaction is the revolution.

These are my thoughts as I look at a famous 1905 photograph which long bedecked my grandmother’s parlor. The photograph, like my grandmother, is British. In it King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra pose placidly in Windsor Palace Garden. Edward wears a top hat and frock coat. Alexandra’s posh hat is veiled and plumed. In the background an avenue of trees as orderly as the Coldstream

Guards stretches back to infinity. Behind them stretches the past, a sunlit corridor of order and stability.

The same year that photograph was taken, Albert Einstein wrote his paper proposing "the special theory of relativity," positing reality as a complex of masses and motion. Matter became shapeless, to be described only in abstract formulas. Matter and energy were conceived as distinct but interchangeable. Fusion, fission, and the atomic age would follow.

That fusion and fission also apply to popular culture. In it many different things blend and converge: the sound of laughter, anguish, ecstasy, pain; rockets ascending and atomic bombs exploding; babies gurgling and AIDS patients dying; the yells of tens of thousands at the Super Bowl, and the chirp of a single cricket in an unending Kansas wheat field. Put all these into your definition.

Be sure to note too that it thrives on opposites. It soothes and irritates, understates and exaggerates, inflates and deflates. Long on compression, it is short on compassion. That compression, epitomized today in the cartoon and the sound bite, has had many names over the ages: the quip retort, one-liner, epigram, bon mot. The list of the master compressors is impressive: Buddha, Aesop, Jesus, Paul, Petrarch, Pascal, Will Rogers, Jane Addams, and Rachel Carson, to name a few. And don't forget Winston Churchill, F. D. R., and John Kennedy. They all knew how to reach the hearts and minds of many.

With such giants to inspire and lead us, we can only hope to reach the hearts and minds of a new age.