

Millennium  
meds: Instant  
hangover capsules  
for people who  
don't party much  
but still want  
to get in the spirit  
of things.



THE RAINBOW ROOM  
IS BOOKED. THE QE2 HAS A FULL DECK  
IT'S STANDING ROOM ONLY AT  
THE PYRAMIDS.  
THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM  
HAS THE WHOLE  
WORLD MAKING BIG PLANS. SO WHY  
IS OUR GOVERNMENT  
STAYING HOME?

**BY JAMES RESTON, JR.**

## GOING OUT WITH A WHIMPER

Last August, in the lofty grandeur of the Rotunda at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where the original copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights are kept in the company of ambassadors and senators, and after a children's choir sang the "Star-Spangled Banner," Bill and Hillary Clinton quietly announced the launching of the White House millennium program. Until then, the White House made almost no reference to the upcoming change of the millennium, and ever since, the historic moment has scarcely been at the forefront of the president's agenda. With a paltry budget of \$1 million, the program—which includes a White House lecture series on "the past and the future," a contemporary American art show titled Expo2000, and 60-second television spots on U.S. history—seems remarkably modest considering that we are talking about a moment that occurs only once every thousand years. It's as if the millennium were a lightweight reprise of the bicentennial, another chance to tout U.S. institutions. The president spoke with pride of establishing a White House Web site so people could e-mail their suggestions about how to mark the occasion. Compared with other nations—many of whose preparations are so ambitious that they verge on the insane—these efforts can only appear lilliputian.

Why is the world's greatest democracy tiptoeing so shyly up to 2000? First of all, the less remarkable passing of the century may seem more relevant to Americans than the turn of the millennium. With its 222-year history, this nation is unable to relate to countries whose past reaches into

antiquity. As its ancient allies prepare to celebrate, the U.S. can't help but feel like an eighth grader trying to crash the senior prom. The other reason the country may be avoiding a longer view of history is that seven-tenths of that past belongs to Native Americans, upon whom the ancestors of the majority powers visited a terrible genocide. Thus, the millennium also speaks to our national guilt.

So in the absence of leadership from Washington, we are left with inspiration from our two other great national powers, Madison Avenue and Hollywood.

A marketing executive sums up the American philosophy about the coming celebration this way: "Pegging the new millennium to a product is just too good an opportunity to pass up." With the fabled threat of apocalypse looming, the marketers have decided that we yearn for lasting things. So cook your supper in indestructible Millennium pots by Farberware, protect your living room's hardwood floors with Millennium polyurethane, and make your face last a thousand years with Millennium [*sic*] skin care products by Elizabeth Arden.

If the consumer industry is answering our need for hopeful dreams of the future, then Hollywood is busy depicting our nightmares. The Gospel according to St. Mark 13:7-8 invites us to look for earthquakes at the turn of the millennium, but could the biblical scribes have imagined these filmed scenarios—*Alien IV*, *Asteroid*, *Independence Day*, *Men in Black*, *Millennium*, *Species*, *The X Files*, and *Godzilla*? We lack only a disaster movie based on new age psychic Ruth Montgomery's fictional prophesy: At the turn of the millennium, the North and South Poles will change

MILLENNIUM OBJECTS CREATED BY EDDIE BOWEN

places. But take heart. Happy endings are in store for us. According to Hollywood, we will meet these global attacks from giant bugs, recombinant DNA, and haywire computers head-on. We will overcome.

And how will television commemorate the turn of the dial? The medium has a problem. How do you celebrate 1,000 years of human history on a picture box if there were no photographs before the first half of the nineteenth century? The solution is, of course, to mark the end of the century rather than the end of the millennium. So Teddy Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler are going to trump Galileo and Genghis Khan.

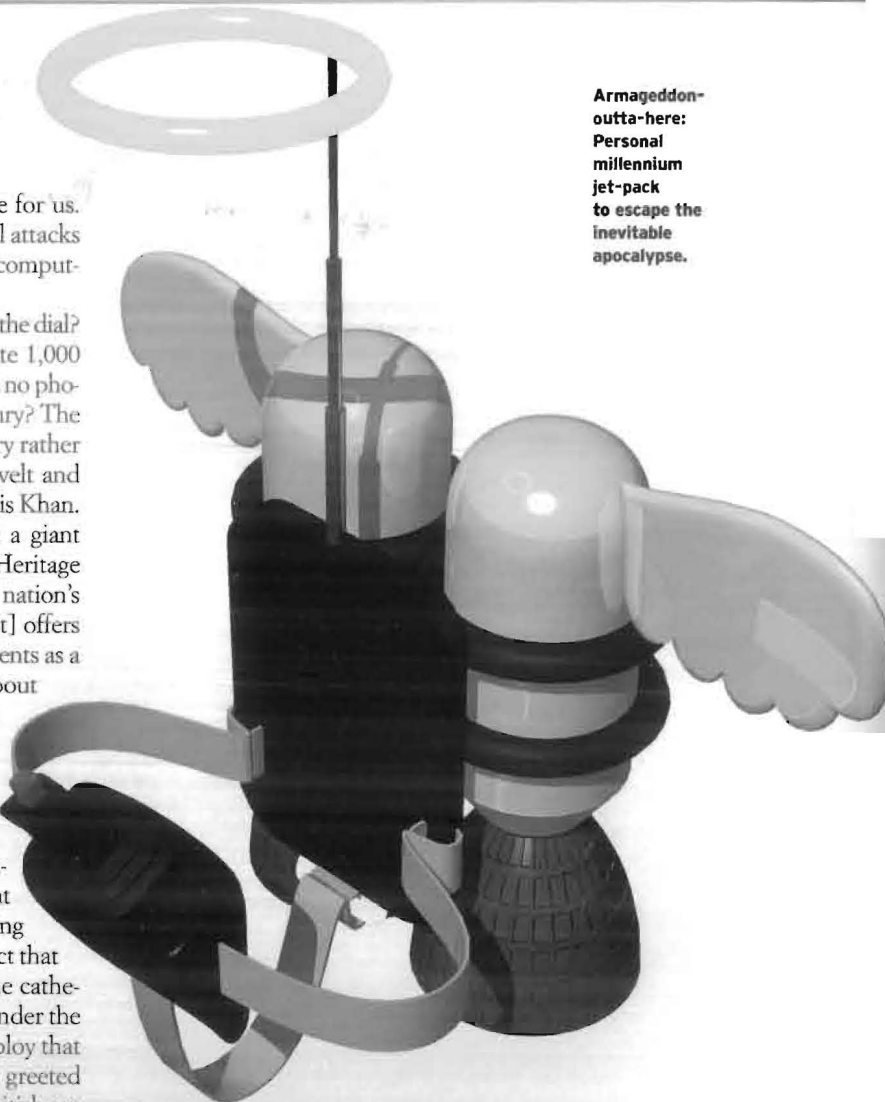
But while Americans are thinking small about a giant event, other countries are not. British National Heritage secretary Chris Smith rather grandly defined his nation's philosophy toward the turn of the millennium: "[It] offers us an opportunity to celebrate our strengths and talents as a nation, to take stock of who we are, and to think about our place in the world." Treating the occasion as a pretext to spruce up the country, Britain has set aside about \$2.4 billion—raised through the national lottery—to mark the calendrical flip. Greenwich, England, where mean time is standardized, will be the center of the festivities. A dome estimated at \$900 million and twice the size of the current record holder, the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, is being built on the Thames River. It's a construction project that its architect, Lord Richard Rogers, compares to the cathedral building of the twelfth century. What will go under the big top has been a state secret, a clever marketing ploy that adds to its mystique. Though the British press has greeted the effort with **DUMP THE DOME** headlines, the British are to be congratulated at least for their ambition.

Less expensive and more interesting are British plans for a Millennium Seed Bank. Ten percent of the world's flora—25,000 species, especially those that are disappearing—will be deposited in the bank, to be located in Kew Gardens, London. And in the Yorkshire town of Doncaster, a \$140 million museum showcasing the earth's current environments is being built on 400 acres of coal slurry. The best part about this project may be the name of one of its interactive exhibits—the Ark—recalling Noah's species-saving heroics during the apocalyptic floods.

In the spirit of the Ark, why limit the effort to plants? Here's a chance for the U.S. to finally take a leadership role in the millennial festivities. Ten percent of the world's animal life, especially endangered species, could be collected in a sperm, embryo, and DNA bank in the U.S. At present, the efforts to preserve the genetic codes of the world's fauna are disjointed and scattered, and sponsored largely by zoos that have to fight for their every dollar. The millennium gives the U.S. an opportunity to centralize these efforts, to create, in effect, a time capsule of the earth's current diversity. What would scientists and historians give to know more about the biological composition of the world in the year 1000?

Of course, for the U.S., the question always is, Where will the money come from? Couldn't the government insist that state lotteries set aside a percentage of their loot for millennium projects? Doubtful. Fixated on budget cutting, Congress would fight endlessly over who and what would get the money. One can almost hear Senator Jesse Helms and Sena-

**Armageddon-  
outta-here:  
Personal  
millennium  
jet-pack  
to escape the  
inevitable  
apocalypse.**



tor Barbara Boxer arguing over decency standards for millennium arts projects. Even museums are politically timid. For some time, the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., considered having a major millennium exhibit on medieval apocalyptic art. But eventually, the idea was scrapped as too dangerous. Museum administrators worried that it would draw end-of-the-world cultists to the capital.

So, we have no visionary person or institution to lead us sublimely through this wonderful moment in time. We have not allowed the millennium to touch our spirit. Instead, it seems to intimidate us. Meanwhile, the Eiffel Tower already sports a gigantic digital board, which is counting down the number of days to 2000. In a privately funded effort, Times Square is planning a video extravaganza, devoting spots to the doings in each of the earth's time zones until the clock reaches midnight. And the costumed samba celebration on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana is going to be dazzling. I personally plan to be on the Greek Island of Patmos, where St. John the Evangelist wrote the Book of Revelation.

The most dramatic spectacle, however, will certainly be the Grand Millennium Ball at the base of the Pyramids, in Egypt, sponsored by the international Millennium Society. Guests will watch a two-hour sound-and-laser-light show, using one of the world's Seven Wonders as a canvas. The show, part documentary, part special effects, is still being conceived. How do you compress a thousand years of the planet's history into two hours? Perhaps it's impossible. But at least, some have the courage and the imagination to make the attempt. **E**