

PETROGLYPHS

The uses, damned abuses, and lame excuses for the Apocalypse

by James Reston, Jr.

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There's more to American culture than merely the movies, of course. There's television. The fall sweeps in 1999 are going to be awesome. The networks have a problem, however. How do you celebrate a thousand years of human history on a picture box when there are no pictures before the first half of the 19th century. The solution: mark the End of the Century rather than the End of the Millennium. There you have moving pictures and archival footage. So Teddy Roosevelt and Adolph Hitler are going to trump Galileo and Genghis Khan.

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neither American nor European. The whole first half of the Second Millennium in America seems foreclosed to us, since it belongs to native Americans, the people upon whom this nation visited a terrible genocide. No wonder we're avoiding the millennium. 7/10s of it belongs to a people who embarrass us...the Cherokees, the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Arapoho and all the other braves who are the living embodiment of our nation's greatest disgrace. Thus, the millennium in America is partly about American guilt.

The safe fall-back position of century-focus makes us think small. It restricts our imagination. Only in August of last year, did the Clinton Administration appoint Hillary Clinton's deputy chief of staff, Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, as the coordinator of the U.S. millennium celebration. That put the world's first nation far behind not only European nations but lesser principalities like Brazil in thinking about fitting ways to mark this unique event. The first suggestions out of the Clinton Administration were modest and inward looking, heavy on lofty words like creativity and grass roots, but thin on substance: a White House lecture series, an art show called Expo2000, millennium moments produced for television by the wounded and moribund the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Great Britain understands this very well. A few months ago the National Heritage Secretary Chris Smith defined the British philosophy toward the millennium. "The millennium," he said, "offers us an opportunity to celebrate our strengths and talents as a nation, to take stock of who we are, to think about our place in the world and to mark a moment of great significance." Britain has set aside \$2.4 billion...billion!...to mark the calendral flip. "Every corner of the UK will be celebrating the Millennium with events large and small," Smith promised, and the British are starting to talk about the Millennium Experience. The English are treating this event as a pretext to spruce up their entire country as if it were the Olympics rather than a Jubilee coming to their country.

Granted, this enormous cache comes from lottery money, which some regard as tainted, but still, Britain rules the way. Greenwich, where mean time is encased, will be the center of the festivities. A huge dome, a \$900 million enterprise twice the size of the current record holder, Georgia Dome in Atlanta, is planned for polluted land on the Thames. It will be a gigantic umbrella whose construction is compared by its architect, Lord Richard Rogers, to the cathedral builders of the 12th century. Lord Rogers calls his colossus a "giant umbrella and an odyssey into the future." As yet, what will go under the big top is a state secret---a government ploy that adds to its interest. In my view, it's clear that the largest Foucault pendulum in the world must certainly be suspended from the roof and that somewhere nearby a nuclear clock, encased in glass, must be available to set one's watch by. Panned in the British press as a "tawdry millennium monument," it has been greeted with "Dump the Dome" headlines. If you turned the thing upside down, it could be the Superbowl of All Time. The authorities are ignoring this carping. The "Jubilee" line of the tube has already been extended to Greenwich.

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Here is an area where the Clinton Administration could jump in with America's power, wealth, and influence, and really turn this into an important global effort.

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relative comfort, and his son, Leif Eriksson to outfit his expedition to Vinland from there.

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Second in a series of three. In April: "Revelation"

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