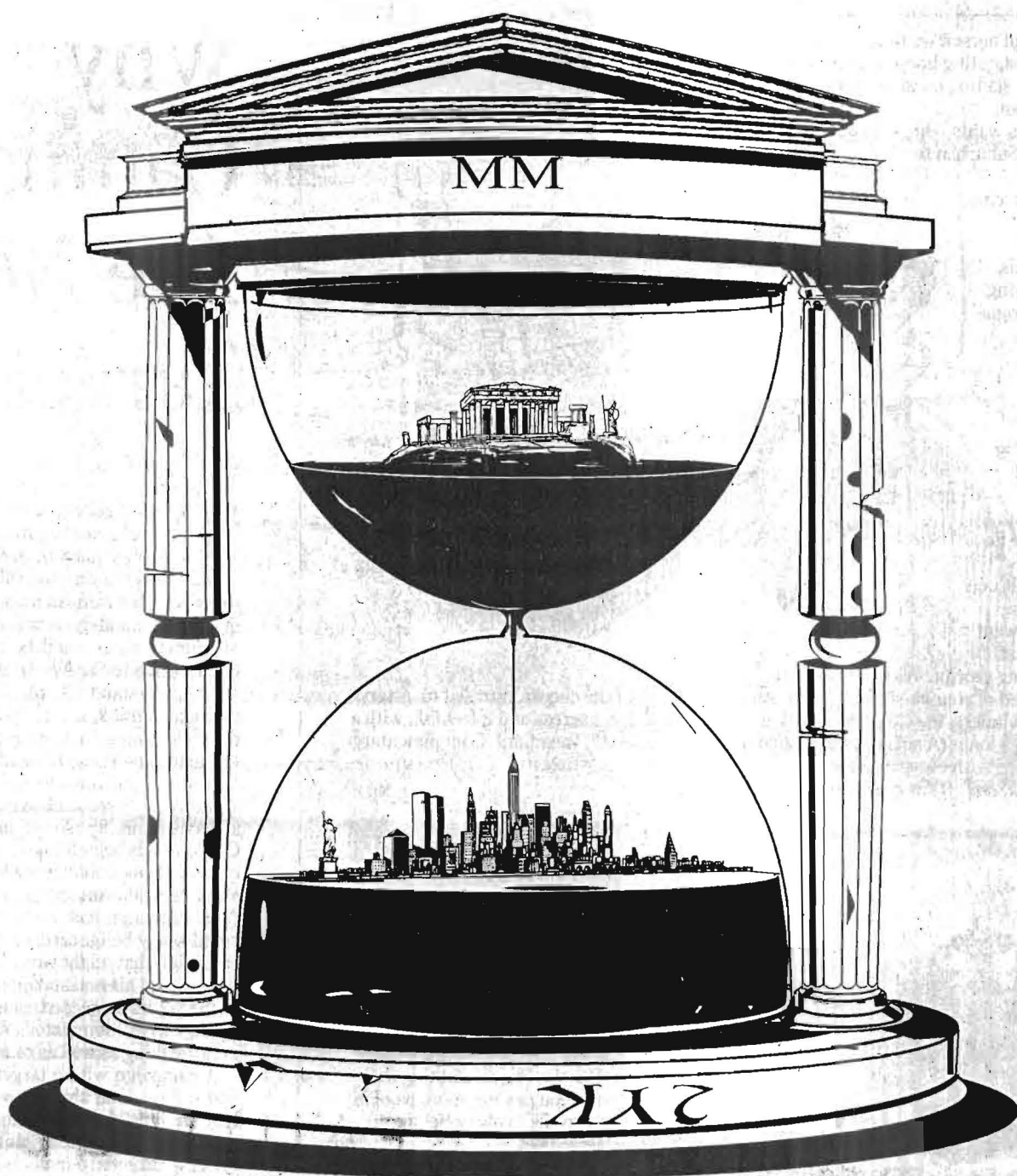


The Moment?



BY ISTVAN BANYAI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

We've Already Missed It.

By JAMES RESTON JR.

It is abundantly clear that this country has already missed out on the glorious opportunity that was the Millennium. In the endless blather about Y2K, in the correctly or incorrectly spelled commercialization of the word, in the trivial topic of whether the new age begins in 2000 or 2001, in the worry about champagne supplies and the focus on the big bashes in Times Square and on the Mall, there will be no meaningful millennial experience for the American people. The failure of imagination is total and across the board: from the political leadership to the scholars, from the priests to the media. Look abroad if you want something for the mind or the soul or the heart. Go to England or Rome or Israel or even Canada.

The turning of a millennium should be a time of grand reckoning. Symbolic dates call for symbolic acts, and these dates and acts can acquire real, concrete meaning if they are used as an excuse—and an opportuni-

ty—for innovative thinking. What better reason than the passing of 1,000 years in the calendar will we ever have for grand dreams about the future and for a solemn reevaluation of the past? Coming to terms with the past can position a society for the future; it frees the imagination and allows us to dream.

This millennial season should have been the time for American artists and visionaries, builders and thinkers to take center stage, but there has been no effort to mobilize them. As a result, the wealthiest, most powerful nation on Earth will leave little permanent behind to mark the moment. American politicians speak as if the millennium were a decaffeinated Bicentennial, with cheap renamings of existing projects as "millennial." To official Washington this seems to be a time yet again to boast about American political institutions. Talk about Old Glory and the Declaration of Independence is safe and palatable, even if it really has nothing to do with a 1,000-year block of time.

Potentially, the millennium is the greatest teaching moment of our times, but who's doing the teaching? Where are the historians and the

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The Need for Markers to Greet the Dawn

MILLENNIUM, From B1

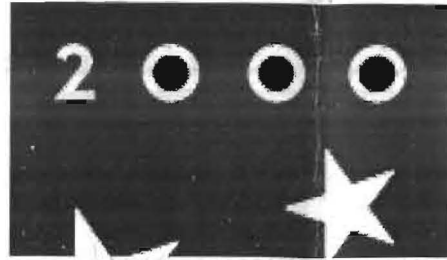
philosophers, the poets and the priests who might guide and inspire us? We have a president whose personal disgrace and corruption so degraded the level of polite conversation in America that he can scarcely be expected to transport the nation through a glorious and uplifting moment of history. We have no minister of culture or influential endowments for the arts and humanities to fill Clinton's vacuum; and Hillary Clinton, who was supposed to be in charge of America's millennium and launched the White House Millennium Council to "encourage a wide variety of projects and events that celebrate our historical and cultural legacy," is now preoccupied with sewers in Schenectady, N.Y.

A steely-eyed look at the last 1,000 years of American history, as a whole, might have been part of our millennial experience. Look at what a "divine" institution is doing. The Roman Catholic Church is engaged in a process it calls historical purification as part of its solemn celebration. For its spiritual well-being at this jubilee year, and to position itself for the Third Millennium, the Church has intentionally revisited the darkest episodes of its past: the cases of Galileo, Jan Hus and Joan of Arc as well as its sorry record of acquiescence in the antisemitism during World War II.

Couldn't this country use a touch of historical purification itself? Would it be so difficult for America to confront its own dark side, slavery and the genocide of the American Indian, and to find some mechanism, at the year 2000, to absorb those scourges once and for all into our national consciousness? Perhaps a Japanese-style apology is not the American way, but, with a little will and imagination, some form of consequential recognition and acknowledgment could be found.

Several weeks ago, we had a good example of an acknowledgment that can lead to renewal and resolution: the groundbreaking for a museum on the Mall devoted to the American Indian. This may in fact be the most important single millennial act of this year, since, after all, 600 of the past 1,000 years in America belong to Native Americans. But no one thought to tie the event to the millennium, and the Clinton administration has made no effort to include Native American in its celebration activities. A museum to the American Indian on the Mall honors the victims and recognizes with admiration and respect the richness of the native culture and the diversity of the peoples who were destroyed. That is an opportunity to teach, and to lay to rest long-standing animosities.

To view our history and world history through a 1,000-year lens forces the mind toward new and original



What Is Going On?

The White House Millennium Council was created with the theme "Honor the Past—Imagine the Future." Highlights of its projects follow:

The president and first lady have begun hosting **Millennium Evenings** at the White House—a series of lectures and cultural events with scholars and artists that are accessible to the public via cybercast over the Internet and broadcast via satellite.

In coordination with the Department of Transportation, the council plans to recognize more than 2,000 existing and new **Millennial Trails**, supporting the development of trails through new federal and state funding, and private partnerships.

As one of its **International Millennial Events**, the council is encouraging the creation of sister-city relationships with communities overseas.

With its **Save America's Treasures** project, the council plans to stimulate private efforts to preserve our national heritage and history. The National Trust for Historic Preservation is providing leadership by inviting individuals, foundations and corporations to participate.

The council has created **Millennium for Kids** Web sites, including an "Inside the White House" newsletter, an EPA Explorers' Club and FEMA for Kids.

—compiled by Outlook

an embarrassment, or worse, as a provocation. The Eastern Orthodox Church does not even read Revelation from the pulpit, because the book is open to such diverse interpretation. In the Catholic Church, the book is part of the three-year liturgical cycle of Sunday readings—and that third year does not fall in the year 2000.

Revelation's hopeful passages in Chapter 21, which promise that "a New Jerusalem will come down from God . . . and God shall wipe away all tears . . ." may occasionally be evoked in the next few months. But how about the lore of Gog and Magog, the Antichrist and the False Prophet, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Seven Seals, the Mark of the Beast, 666 or the Whore of Babylon? It is as if American clergymen hesitate to address these wild allegories, because they fear more incarnations of David Koresh or Heaven's Gate. The fascinating parables of the Book of Revelation, it appears, will be left largely to the novelists.

With no guides and mentors here, we have to look elsewhere. Great Britain leads the way in preparations for the millennium. In 1992, that nation established a commission of its best minds to define what the millennium was, how Britain should mark the occasion, how its millennial activities might be paid for. Britain has treated the coming of the year 2000 as an occasion to spruce up the whole nation. By tapping the proceeds of its national lottery, it is offering every little village an opportunity to refurbish a local theater or park or historical site and make that refurbishment a millennium contribution. Prime Minister Tony Blair has already given a millennial lecture at Oxford University. The Millennium Dome, bigger than our Georgia Dome in Atlanta and devoted solely to education, is nearly complete at Greenwich. A millennium seed bank has been established to gather the seeds of the world into a single place to demonstrate the biodiversity of the world at this magical time. The Royal Mail has issued a series of millennium stamps that commemorate the inventors, the explorers, the entertainers, the workers and the scientists of British history. And Britain talks comfortably about giving its people a "millennium experience."

What is the United States doing? No buildings. No stamps. No presidential lecture at Harvard. No innovative or visionary ideas. America in the *fin de siècle* of the 1890s did far better with a century's end than we're doing with the end of the millennium. Then there was an explosion of plays, art, music and books, including Edward Bellamy's smash success, "Looking Backward." There was the monumental glory of Chicago's 1893 World's Fair and the spirit of inventiveness characterized by Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell.

the new millennium, if this country is to stand for anything more than its wealth and democratic ideal, Americans need to become comfortable with the "culture."

The millennium could be viewed as a kind of barvah or confirmation for a youthful nation that must som into a mature civilization in the next millennium. The 1960s, France showed what could be done for creative life of a nation when a figure of great stature, Andre Malraux, became its minister of culture. An American figure with Malraux's stature and raux's mandate could teach all sections of the country how to do that and could teach his or her own people how better to promote American culture, without sounding undemocratic. William Styron or Arthur Miller or Reynolds Price or Eudora Welty come to mind as candidates for the job.

We can forget about President Clinton as our swain for this boat ride, but Congress should play a role. In the year 2000, it might hold an occasional historical debate and thus fulfill its call as an educational as well as a political body. This is the time to revisit America's Founding Myth, for instance, 1892, Congress designated Oct. 12 as Columbus Day since Columbus "discovered" America, and in 1492 decreed that Columbus Day be a federal holiday. But Columbus did not discover America; he discovered Caribbean islands, and then set about to enslave the native population. Consequently, Columbus Day, freighted with embarrassment and misinformation, become a sop to the Italian-American community, at the least widely observed federal holiday we have.

It has been established, through carbon dating, that far earlier European presence in North America with the Viking explorer Leif Ericsson in the year A.D. Canada has created a national park at L'Anse-au-Loup in Newfoundland to commemorate the site of the first Viking settlement. And it is widely acknowledged that the third Viking voyage was led by a woman, Gudrun Thorbjarnardottir, the wife of Leif's younger brother who for a time lived on the island of Manhattan and birth to the first known European-American child.

Congress has acknowledged Ericsson's claim should now debate a resolution to broaden and celebrate the current federal holiday as Discoverers Day, honoring Ericsson and other explorers of the Americas, Ponce de León, Hernando de Soto, John Smith, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, John Wesley Powell, Merriweather Lewis and William Clark, the Polynesians who settled Hawaii, Sacagawea and, perhaps, Thorbjarnardottir. They should take their places alongside Columbus in a