Wrong Millennium: The New Orleans of the Mind

Early in December, 1999, the head of CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, Cofer Black, called. “We have to go to battle stations.” . . . Black had proof that al Qaeda was planning attacks around the Millennium rollover. . . (It was the sort of attention we needed in the summer of 2001 . . .)
—Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, 2004 (pages 205, 212)

(1) Congratulations Survivors

*December 10, 2000*

All right folks, there are now only weeks remaining until the end of the century and the start of the next millennium. Get ready. The revelry of 12/31/99 was nothing compared to the blowout we now should be contemplating for the end of the twentieth century, finally upon us in a few weeks.

I know Y2K is (or was) supposed to be an exotic form of techno-AIDS that would quickly consume the planet as a whole. Well, Florida voting machines aside, it hasn’t turned out that way. Now that we’ve moved through the year 2000 without having “the time of the end”—as fans love to call it—translated by confused computers into “the end of time,” we must still face the vexing question whether 2000 is indeed the first year of the third millennium; or, far less romantically, the last year of the second millennium. Given my own religious predilections—“if you’re already deep on religion, why go overboard?”—I feel that even if the world still manages, for whatever reason, to get into big trouble toward the end of 2000, it would be better to regard 2000 as the last year of the current K rather than the first of the next. Why would the world wait to obliterate itself during the first year of a new millennium? Too anticlimactic. I say we fish or cut bait now: That’s about as deep as I can get.

The whole question of ending and beginning, of course, turns on whether you think there was a year zero. I say there was not. Therefore every decade is numbered from 1 to 10, so that the current decade, for instance, runs from 1991 to the end of 2000; this decade, and the twentieth century, and the millennium—all end with the last day of the year 2000. (From 1991 to 2000 is ten years. Count it off on your fingers if you don’t believe me.) So, the real question is, *why should one believe that there was never a year zero?*

(a) At the time this problem first arose, whenever that was, the zero had not yet been invented and spread around by Hindu and Arab scholars.

(b) A null year in the days when early Christians, among others, were designing what would become western calendars, would have been a sacrilege. You can’t say that Christ was born in the year zero of the century zero. Insofar as we have usable dates recorded by ancient scribes, I’ve never heard of any dates that were set at zero. And remember: The concept of a cipher in numbers had not been established.

(c) In the interest of consistency, we should say that the year 2000 is the tenth and last
year of the current decade, just as the twentieth century is the tenth and last century of the second millennium. There are ten years in a decade, just as there are ten centuries in a millennium. You cannot say that 1991 through 1999 was a decade unless you lost a finger somewhere along the line—count them again, sweetie. Although a little on the wild side for me, 12/31/99 was not that much fun, not a really big deal.

Another consistency argument: Back in 1966 we had a major blast (bail, $1,500) when Time et al. said that we should celebrate the fact that we had struggled two-thirds of the way through the 20th century. If, however, you believe that the 20th century ran from 1900 through 1999, then, counting 1900 as year one, you must believe that Time should have announced our celebration for August 1965, rather than August 1966. Are you trying to tell me that Time doesn’t know what time it is? Furthermore, I suspect that Time did (or should have done) what I did: They read the great Porter Perrin, whose Writer’s Guide and Index to English was gospel in college classes back in the fifth decade of the twentieth century—not the sixth, doggone it! Check this out (1950, page 467):

... people feel that the century changes when the figure for the hundreds changes: there were celebrations for the beginning of the twentieth century on January 1 of both 1900 and 1901. (Compare the debate over whether the second half of our century begins with 1950 or 1951.)

Finally, another point on consistency: Those of us who still functioned on the first day of 2000 may actually have transacted a little business other than leaning over the commode. If we did so, we probably wrote the date in standard American shorthand, as 01/01/00. Obviously, those numbers don’t look right as the start of anything: They are not balanced. Why would we say, in citing the first day of the first month, that there is no zeroth month and no zeroth day of the month, and then say that the first year of the millennium is the zeroth year! As the little girl said in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, following her investigation of sexual intercourse—“it doesn’t signify.”

(d) Archaeologists who nowadays do radiocarbon dating, again as far as I know, never conclude that anything happened in the year zero. The precision of radiocarbon dating—and I wouldn’t let my boys start it before they’re at least fifteen—is probably not so fine as 1 in 2000, so it’s nearly as good as a Florida ballot. But archaeologists must sometimes hit on results by chance in which their computer estimates a date to the year as, say, 3/10—three-tenths of the way through whatever you consider to be the first year. That would round to the year zero, but I think that ordinarily the archaeologists and their dating gurus would just translate such a number by saying something like “around the year one, such-and-such happened.” Somebody please ask them. If they don’t do it right, please tell them. They’ll dig it.

(e) Stanley Kubrick must have had in mind the first year of the new millennium when he named a movie “2001.” Even in Hollywood, why would anybody name a movie for the second year of any given millennium? Save it for the sequel. Then too, would you go to a movie called “1000”? Especially if you could go to one called “2001 Dalmatians”?
I might also point out that in the seventh decade of my days vertical on this earth, I was too run down, on 01/01/00, to celebrate the fact (really non-fact, until next month) that I finally had busted into the new millennium: Due to my latest aviation physical, on 12/29/99, I had to allow several easy weeks for the full recovery of my fully-tested prostate. Come 01/01/01 and thenceforward, I’m flying high!

Truth is, I haven’t yet recovered from 01/01/51.

(2) The Hindu-Arabic Handicap: A Disaster of Numerology? 
*September, 2004*

The apparent mistake was very simple. Here, in the concluding remarks of *The 9/11 Commission Report* (pages 358-60), is a concise description of it:

> Before concluding our narrative, we offer a reminder, and an explanation, of the one period in which the government as a whole seemed to be acting in concert to deal with terrorism—*the last weeks of December 1999 preceding the millennium* [italics added].

In the period between December 1999 and early January 2000, information about terrorism flowed widely and abundantly. The flow from the FBI was particularly remarkable because the FBI at other times shared almost no information. That from the intelligence community was also remarkable, because some of it reached officials—local airport managers and local police departments—who had not seen such information before and would not see it again before 9/11, if then. . .

Why was this so? Most obviously, it was because everyone was already on edge with the millennium and possible computer programming glitches (“Y2K”) that might obliterate records, shut down power and communication lines, or otherwise disrupt daily life. Then, Jordanian authorities arrested 16 al Qaeda terrorists planning a number of bombings in that country. Those in custody included two U.S. citizens. . .

After the millennium alert, the government relaxed. Counterterrorism went back to being a secret preserve for segments of the FBI, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security Group. But the experience showed that the government was capable of mobilizing itself for an alert against terrorism. . .

In the summer of 2001, [CIA Director] Tenet, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security
Group did their utmost to sound a loud alarm, its basis being intelligence indicating that al Qaeda planned something big. But the millennium phenomenon was not repeated.

(3) Conclusions

March 4, 2005

First, counterterrorist agencies in the U.S. apparently thought of the year 2000 as the first year of the new millennium, and they attributed to this year extraordinary numerological properties. For instance (Commission Report, page 182): “After the millennium alert, elements of the U.S. government reviewed their performance. The CIA’s leadership was told that while a number of plots had been disrupted, the millennium might be only the ‘kick-off’ for a period of extended attacks.” Numerology and sports analogies: Bad combination.

The emphasis on the year 2000 went way beyond the importance of plots “disrupted” during that year, which referred to very little other than a few arrests in Jordan and Vancouver; it is hard to believe that these arrests accounted for the emphasis on 2000 as “the millennium” worthy of a special alert.

Second, although there were, in late 1999, anxieties due to the Y2K threat and to the crash off the coast of Massachusetts of Egypt Air Flight 990, the Y2K threat was actually a success story, and the Egypt Air disaster remains unexplained. As for Y2K, it illustrates what I call International Falls Effect: During the horrendous winter of 1977 I heard a TV interviewer ask the admissions director of a hospital in International Falls, Minnesota, how the hospital handles the many cases of frostbite that must occur during severe winter weather. The admissions director answered that he could not remember the last time he had seen a case of frostbite, and that one could probably find many more cases in a place like New Orleans. Avoiding frostbite, he implied, is part of the culture of International Falls.

International Falls Effect, then, is the tendency to adapt safely to real, pervasive, and clearly perceived threats, with the proviso that, once you’ve adapted, you can more or less forget about the threats.

Third, think of dangerous frost as a random scatter of sleeper cells. Sleeper cells are mentioned throughout the commission report, because we more or less forget about them. By definition, and in common with frostbite, sleeper cells do not have any sense of a deadline—sleeper cells, says Clarke (page 227), “took the long view.” Fighting them must be part of the culture of the global community. You cannot ordinarily fight sleeper cells by declaring crash programs, or wars, to correspond with unusual calendar events like Y2K and other such irrelevancies, any more than you can fight frostbite through a quickie program to eliminate cumulonimbus mamma clouds. According to the 9/11 commission, Cofer Black, of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center, told Condoleezza Rice in May, 2001, that the current threat level was a 7 on a scale of 1 to 10, as compared to an 8 during “the millennium.” The frost had lingered on, all over the New Orleans of our collective consciousness.

It will be a while before we run the risk of again selecting the wrong millennium. But we have ample opportunity to commit the error that bedevils every journalist: the making of an unwarranted assumption.