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## Editor's Note

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# Editor's Note

*Padraig O'Malley*

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When you receive this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, we should be crossing the threshold from millennium mania to millennium madness. The former has concerned itself almost exclusively with the etiquette of millennium rites, where one ought to be on the occasion itself — embracing the starlit grandeur of the ancient pyramids, as if to remind ourselves that some things preceded the outgoing millennium and even exceeded the achievements of our own: in the silence of a Tibetan monastery to contemplate in serenity the philosophical implications of the momentous transition and reflect perhaps on the meaning of life itself, the imponderables of the seamlessness of eternity, the indivisibility of a universe that continues to confound our attempts to unravel its mysteries, or, as members of the less esoteric masses, part of worldwide revelries linked by satellite feeds that promise little more than massive hangovers on the first day of the new millennium.

Millennium specials abound, all customer-designed to ensure that all wishes, fantasies, daydreams, and whatever exotics can be squeezed onto the millennium smorgasbord of the once-in-a-lifetime experience can be accommodated. Want to be on the remote island where the last sunset of the millennium will occur? No problem. Want to be on the even more remote island where the first sunrise of the new millennium will occur? No problem. Want the right champagne? Problem: there's been a run on the stuff for over a year. Want to make a reservation at a restaurant that specializes in once-in-a-thousand-years menus? Problem: you should have made that reservation back in 1998. Want to have a drink at your local watering hole? Problem: bartenders the world over, it seems, want to join the inebriated mobs, not cater to them. In New York, we are told, even at guaranteed rates of \$600 for bartending on *the* night plus the lavish tips one could expect from the rollicking throngs, there are few takers. Having a boisterous time is more important than seeing that other people are enjoying one.

The lists are being compiled: lists of the millennium best and worst in every conceivable category of human endeavor. Endless treatises are being written on *the meaning of it all*. Pundits scold themselves on the redundancy of their punditry while happily trotting out reams of the redundancies they bemoan as irrelevant: was Attila the Hun really worse than Genghis Khan? Or would Adolf Hitler put them both to shame? (These comparisons are not meant to slight Josef Stalin, who certainly has a place on anyone's list of the best — or worst — mass killers of the period.)

But these are considerations and concerns that pertain to our world: the world of the "haves," the world of the privileged few who comprise less than 20 percent of the world's population and consume more than 80 percent of the world's output.

As a species we haven't particularly distinguished ourselves in the last ten centuries, but then again, in terms of evolution and the endless elasticity of the boundaries of time and space, one thousand years is merely a blip on a continuum that has no beginning and no end, too short a time to attach the significance with which we have endowed it.

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But we do have one singular achievement to our credit. We have — through pure dumb obstinate persistence in the face of formidable obstacles, tenacity of almost unendurable proportions, dedication that goes far beyond the call of any duty, sacrifice that turns the concept itself on its head — managed to perfect the means to obliterate ourselves, not just once but hundreds of times over.

We can make time and space meaningless. In achieving the capacity to annihilate every living thing, we have eliminated the need for a Higher Being, for a God who is the custodian of our lonely existence in the vastness of an infinitely expanding universe. Fallible in all things, we have engineered infallibility at the cost of our ceasing to be. With no memory traces of our existence as receptacles of our having ever been here, we have managed to make life itself an illusion — and we have the conjurers to perform the final act. Only we would not know it to be so.

Memories are not for the present; they are artifacts that allow us to put conceptualizations of the future into some rational context. But rationality is predicated on the assumption that some actions are contrary to our genetically ingrained instincts for self-preservation. We can no longer cling to this comforting assumption. Since the appurtenances of universal self-destruction are proliferating, and we continue in our quest to find ever more refined and cost-effective ways to exterminate ourselves (irrational?), we have come to the end of history — not in the manner Francis Fukuyama envisages in *The End of History and the Last Man*, but in our ability to eliminate self and consciousness of being. History requires memory; with the eradication of memory there is no history. The termination of all life, now or in the coming millennium, terminates all preceding life. It is not a matter of closing the book, but of the book never having been written.

But less of the theology of oblivion, and back to the more mundane. If somehow in the next millennium we manage to navigate the circumstances of our continued existence as a species, we will face one overriding challenge that will, if not met, make that navigation more difficult, given the capacity of even the most meager among us to acquire the means of mutually assured self-extermination.

That challenge is to bring about a more equitable distribution of income and wealth both within countries and between countries, especially between the countries in the northern and southern hemispheres. To our everlasting discredit, there is little evidence that, on a relative basis, we have done much to alleviate disparities of well-being between rich and poor during the millennium about to close — although I emphasize the word *relative*.

Increasingly, we live in a world of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” If the issues of the growing imbalances between north and south and the intolerable burdens of debt with which countries in the southern hemisphere, especially Africa, are overwhelmed or not addressed, the anger, resentment, and sheer desperation that have been smoldering in these countries for decades — centuries in many cases — will ignite into a conflagration of hostility and animosity with unforeseeable and, perhaps, uncontrollable consequences — consequences far removed from the small gestures of impotence that have characterized their pleas for help in the past.

Tired of being perpetual supplicants, feeling isolated in the global economy with its dog-eat-dog ideology, forever having to sanction severe and often counterproductive conditions donor countries and international agencies attach to loans, the poor countries in the south feel abandoned, not part of the global village we love to meander on about but inhabitants of the squatter camps that surround it. Marginalized and forgotten, they

are not in a forgiving mood. Living on the scraps of the world's wealth their well-to-do northern neighbors throw in their direction, they would rather suffer in dignity than swallow silently the humiliations that in the end leave them no better off.

Even in the United States, there is a creeping recognition that something has gone awry. After enjoying an unprecedented period of uninterrupted prosperity during the nineties, with no end to the boom in sight and a stock market that has hit levels no trader in his wildest dreams would have imagined ten years ago, the distortions that the market-driven economy has produced are beginning to undermine some of the fundamental tenets that made America the beacon of hope, the land of opportunity for millions in the past.

According to figures released by a number of federal agencies and research organizations, weekly wages for the average American are 12 percent below their inflation-adjusted levels of 1973; median family household income in 1999 is, in real terms, about the same as it was in 1989; the one percent of the country's highest income earners make more than what 100 million workers earn; the average working week has expanded to forty-seven hours, which, for the average middle-income family, translates into an additional nine weeks of work annually. But the real pay for the extra hours worked comes to a meager \$2.20.

The richest one percent of American households retain 40 percent of the country's wealth. That is double the percentage of wealth they held in 1976. The bottom 40 percent of Americans experienced a collapse of 80 percent in their net worth. The figures on debt burden just get worse, leading Lester Thurow, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management to write, "The great American middle class has become a non-participant in the American dream." One wonders where that leaves those not fortunate enough to fall into that class — once aspired to by tens of millions, now a debt trap.

Millennium madness refers to increasing concerns about possible Y2K glitches. Even as evidence mounts that the probabilities of serious glitches are minimal, concerns continue to increase. All may be well in the United States, but what about the rest of the world into which this country is wired? And since perceptions are everything, and people are more prone to believe that more things will go haywire than the government and the private sector would lead them to believe — who after all wants to cry fire in a crowded theater and raise the specter of panic, a mad rush for the nearest exit? — they are more likely to put their eggs in more than one basket, which, of course, leaves open the possibility that we might run out of baskets.

This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* covers a range of public policy subjects, all pertinent to the direction federal- and state-level government will take in the coming decades. I draw your attention to two in particular, not because they deserve any special signaling out because of superior merit, but because each addresses the issue of personal character and public life, already the focus of the 2000 presidential campaign. Richard Hogarty, in his essay on the legacy of Francis Sargent, who served as governor of Massachusetts from 1969 through 1975, prefaces his narrative with an epigraph from David McCullough: "History reminds us that nothing counterfeit has any staying power, an observation, incidentally, made by Cicero about 60 B.C. [in a pre-millennium era, to keep things in perspective!]. History teaches that character counts. Character above all."

This same epigraph would make an ironic preface to Garrison Nelson's essay on the late Speaker of the House John W. McCormack, one of the major architects of both Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. The irony is

that according to the norms of today's custodians of the politically correct, McCormack would not have been judged fit to run for dogcatcher. Nelson also raises a more intriguing question: What is character?

If, perchance, the next issue of the *NewEngland Journal of Public Policy* does not reach you, you may take it that we at the McCormack Institute fell afoul of Y2K. In this event, your copy, written in longhand, will be hand-delivered in due course — that is, if we can find anyone who remembers how to write! ❁