A Letter From Contributing Editor
Gregory McNamee Addressing the State of the Nation

Time Must Have a Stop

We are at the end of history.

So a neo-Hegelian Washington thinktanker, Francis Fukuyama, proclaimed in his book of the same name toward the end of the Reagan presidency, crowing—as if to repudiate Vladimir Mayakovsky, who wrote hopefully, “The proletarian rooster crows at the dawn of man”—that with the worldwide collapse of communism had come the final synthesis in the dialectic of history, and thus, presto, a stop to history itself.¹

It was a neat equation, elegantly stated. But, having spent a little time there in the post-Tiananmen era, I wonder what the man or woman in the street in Beijing or Shanghai might have to say about it. There are, after all, a few communists left in such places as Havana and the Heavenly City and Harvard, and the two George Bushes’ self-satisfied destruction of Iraq at the beginning of the last decade of the bloody 20th century and the dawn of the so-far-unproletarian 21st suggests our continuing descent down the great chain of being, the past as prologue.²

Whether we are indeed at the end of this great cosmic science-fiction novel called history remains to be seen. Predatory greed, blind ambition, good old-fashioned hatred, famine and plague—all offer at least the promise of a spectacular dénouement, and I’m inclined to think that Iraq will return the favor one day soon.³ In the face of feeding-frenzy speculative capitalism and of ethnicidal fracases in such places as Bosnia and Chechnya and Rwanda, history appears to have an ample store of tricks up its sleeve, enough, surely, that for millennia to come we will be obliged to climb the dialectical ladder toward what passes for a German logician’s heaven.

History endures. But, as The Rolling Stones presciently warned, we are clearly out of time.

Everyone of my generation, born between 1945 and 1960, seems to be in a damnable, headlong, panicky hurry these days. The younger are busier still. We all rush between relationships, jockeying our phones and such things, we are ever more tightly tethered to the business at hand. With time-saving technologies, our days should expand, and, just as the ergonomists predicted, they have indeed grown, but only to accommodate still more labor, useful or not, and certainly not more leisure. Work can now interrupt us at any hour of the day or night. An employer’s demands need have no respect for the clock. We can be sure that this is not the first time our grown-up has been called away from the table to plug still another projection into still another spreadsheet. Nor will it be the last.

A real advance in civilization, of course, would work in just the opposite direction. We would all unplug our phones on the weekend or, better, agitate for strict laws to prevent bosses from invading their charges’ privacy in the first place.

It’s another revolution that needs to happen.

“And indeed there will be time,” wrote T.S. Eliot, “To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ ” Will there be time indeed? The decisions and revisions that a minute can reverse come at us ever more quickly, a mad series of entropic episodes swirling by. We have scarcely the time to dare comprehend their passage as our scant allotment flashes past, quick-marched by relativity’s drill sergeant.

In the 1920s, Emily Post, the doyenne of manners, pronounced that a decent woman would mourn the death of her husband for at least three years, garbed in widow’s black. Half a century later, her late colleague, Amy Vanderbilt, reckoned that a week of bereavement should suffice. I wouldn’t be surprised if the figure has dropped to a long weekend by now.⁵ We are a busy people, we Americans; too busy to wonder, too busy...
for trifles like death, too busy for family, too busy to take stock of our miserable selves on this suffering little planet. We lead the world in the number of hours worked by far: 1,978 yearly by a 2000 count, as opposed to 1,942 in 1990 and 1,883 in 1980. The Japanese put in 1,889 hours, the French 1,656, the Germans 1,560, and the Norwegians, those lucky stalwarts, a mere 1,399. We have no time for ourselves, but plenty of time to do the devil’s work.

By which I mean this: The planet is suffering, in large part, because busy people consume more resources than the lazy-bones among us, and the busiest of them, namely we Americans, are ravaging the globe at an astonishing rate, charging into the abyss with our eyes wide open, knowing full well the harm that we do. If the Japanese wish banzai—May you live 10,000 years!—ever came true, a legion of postmodern busy beavers would scrape the planet clean before we cleared adolescence.

And that, of course, is just what we’re doing, everywhere and all the time and with ever-increasing industrial precision: felling forests, clearing deserts of their unsightly cacti, scraping down mountains, trawling oceans, busy not because we must be but because it is all we know how to do.

“Thought’s the slave of life, and life time’s fool,” Shakespeare observed, writing in a world where the very notion of time as a measurable entity was new. The clock was then a recent invention,9 the product of the alchemists’ quest for perpetual motion. They found it, too: One has only to consider the Long Island Expressway at 8 in the morning or the Santa Monica Freeway at dusk to know that medieval magicians must still exercise a dark power over this age of smart machines and freeways.

Elsewhere Shakespeare wrote, “I were better to be eaten away with rust than to be scourd to nothing with perpetual motion.” Let me second that. The end of time—of time available to us, of time under our control, of free time—wears us all away, planing off those little burs of individuality, smoothing us into perfectly functioning ball bearings in the great racecup of the State.

Any destiny but that erosion, please.

Resist. Emulate Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who sold his watch as a youth, proclaiming, “Thank heavens, I shall no longer need to know what time it is!” Take the day off and tell your employer that you demand more hours for yourself. If the whistle blows at 8, do what pleases you until 9, then go home early. Call in sick on the anniversary of the Haymarket riots. Give the planet a break by staying in bed. Be purposeful in your idleness; invest latissude with a political dimension all its own. Do not ask for directions, for you cannot be lost if you’re on vacation.

Spurn alchemy, revive history, and abet all acts of temporal revolution.

Take your time.

WRITER: Gregory McNamee is the coeditor of Comeback Wolves, to be published in September 2005 by Johnson Books.

A FEW NOTES, WITH A TIP OF THE HAT TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

1. The title of this essay is stolen from Aldous Huxley, of course. He’s little read these days, and too bad; he holds up pretty well, and he may have been one of the few modern writers to be truly happy. See Nicholas Murray’s Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual (St. Martin’s, 2003). As for Francis Fukuyama, he’s indisputably neocconservative, but of a more interesting and subtle bent than the rest of the lot, a bunch of crypto-fascists who are less crypto every day. And as for the great, unfortunate Mayakovsky, see Francine du Plessix Gray’s Them: A Memoir of Parents (Penguin, 2005).


3. Empires come, empires go. See Robert D. Kaplan’s new book Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground (Random House). Then go watch Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11, if you haven’t seen it already, and maybe the last installment of the Star Wars epic, if you can stand the dialogue.

4. See John Strausbaugh, Rock till You Drop: The Decline From Rebellion to Nostalgia (Verso, 2001), for all the reasons The Rolling Stones must have a stop themselves.

5. It’ll get worse. See Barbara Ehrenreich’s new book Bait and Switch (Metropolitan Books).

6. For a start, hunt up a copy of Franklin Rosemont’s anthology Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion (Black Swan, 1989). Read Kenneth Rexroth’s Autobiographical Novel (New Directions, 1991). Listen to The Clash and Midnight Oil. Then tell every child you can influence about the great traditions of American anarchism.


8. Someone please check the revised edition of Judith Martin’s exquisite Miss Manners’ Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior (Norton, 2005) and let me know—for who has time to read the damn thing?