

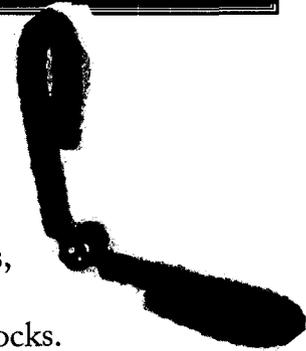
Tidbits & Outrages

Layover?

Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal, plans to open a brothel in the airport's departure area.

But they loved the thighmasters.

A poll recently revealed that this year's top unwanted Christmas gifts in Britain were home-knitted pullovers, talcum powder, sandwich toasters, and Elvis Presley clocks.



**She looked good enough to eat...
REUTER'S HEADLINE:
"CHEF GETS LIFE FOR COOKING WIFE."**

Why? Because, because, because!

Brian Brille, a Wall Street investment banker, dressed as Glinda the Good Witch from The Wizard of Oz and hired three dwarfs, dressed as munchkins, to follow him around a recent Halloween party.

Guiliani's already ordered one



A new computer used by the Providence Police told them to arrest innocent people. They finally fixed it after eight people were wrongly arrested.

It was under the uzi.

In search of evidence, D.C. police impounded the taxi belonging to a stabbing victim. They searched for fingerprint evidence but failed to find the blood-stained knife in the back seat.

Self-esteem

Every year for the last 14, Wally Morris has published an award-winning financial report for the city of Milwaukee. This year was no exception. The award was signed by the president of the awards committee: Wally Morris.

A fire-eater has been named chief of police

Mayor Jerry Brown has appointed a tattoo artist to the Oakland Arts Council.

THE IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE

After divorcing last year, Frances and Harold Mountain couldn't agree on how to split their Beanie Baby collection. A family court judge solved the issue by ordering the couple to divide them one by one while he watched.

Political Booknotes

Fraud.com

By Paul Taylor

ANYONE WHO HAS EVER GOTTEN a piece of direct mail from a politician or issue group is familiar with the writing style. Enemies are ominous! Ruination is imminent! Sentences are punchy! It's a rhetorical never-never land where the exclamation point is king and nuance an outcast.

As I labored through Dick Morris' strange and fraudulent book, I kept thinking about that mode of discourse, for the political future he conjures up in cyberspace feels like a corner of hell where all the direct mail keeps being recirculated.

In Morris' overheated imaginings, candidates will soon be communicating to voters one-at-a-time in a stream of targeted emails and videos that trip through cyberspace cost-free. If it sounds like a killer app for personalized political pander, that's probably why the author—who's spent his career helping politicians perfect the art form—finds it appealing. But to anyone who thinks that campaigns ought to play out in the biggest public square, precisely so they can invite citizens to weigh self-interest against common purpose, it's a scary prospect.

It's by no means the scariest thing Morris sees in his crystal ball, however. That would be his vision of a politics in which citizens use cyberspace to talk back to their elected leaders in a daily stream of referendums. So today we'll all be voting on taxes, tomorrow on abortion, Thursday on war in the Balkans, and Friday (because democracy shouldn't always be such a bore!) on whether Bill and Hillary should split up.

Mind you, these plebiscites won't be government-run. They'll be sponsored by advertiser-supported com-

mercial Websites like—you've probably guessed the punch line—*Vote.com*. That's not just the name of Morris' new book; it's also the name of his new Website. And, so Morris would have us believe, these plebiscites are the tool that will convert our representative system of government into a direct democracy.

"We are about to reclaim the power Jefferson would have given us," the author proclaims, revving up his faux populism at full throttle. "We'll still choose our president and Congress by the old election system, but the influ-

ence the public can bring to bear will make it far less important whom we elect." It will be government by applause meter.

This is a very old and very bad idea. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato observed the first stirrings of democracy in Athens and worried that leaders who rely too much on the approval of the masses would "never tell an unpleasant truth." Since then, history has confirmed time and again that majorities need protection from demagogues, and minorities need protection from majorities.

Happily, by the time our founders reinvented democracy, they were wise enough to construct a republic based not only on Jefferson's passion for individual liberty, but on Madison's understanding of the need for constitutional space between leaders and followers.

Morris is no Jeffersonian. He just plays one on his book jacket, the better to hustle his Website. If you stay with the book all the way to page 168 (and I don't recommend it), you discover he, too, has a dim view of direct democracy.

"Fifteen years from now," he writes, "as the evidences mounts that people have made the wrong choices and voted their fears and hates more than their hopes and dreams, we will

collectively come to realize the need to curb ourselves and bring back the system of checks and balances so basic to our Constitution.... Like the French Revolutionaries seizing power in 1789, [the people] will take their revenge on those who have listened to them so little in the past before they relinquish, on sober second thought, the power the Internet will give them."

So let's get this straight. First the people storm the ramparts and seize power. Then they do a bunch of stupid things. Then they mysteriously smarten up. Then they give power back. And the trigger for this wild 15-year cycle is not war or famine or fundamentalism or tyranny or depression. It's the Internet. And Morris owns the Website where the revolution's gonna happen, baby. And ad space is still available!

Too bad the book turns out to be such shallow hucksterism, because Morris is on to one of the more intriguing questions of our era: Can the Internet rescue politics?

By cutting the cost of political communication to virtually zero, can it slay the dragon of big money? By providing a cornucopia of information at the click of a mouse, can it topple the 30-second ad? By offering the ease of online voting, can it bring citizens back to politics? By enabling two-way communication between citizen and elected officials, can it reshape the architecture of democracy?

Unlike Morris, I have no crystal ball. I do have a few tentative observations.

If politics can't win the competition for eyeballs in the real world, it's hard to see how it does better in cyberspace. Sure it's easier than ever to get political information online. It's also easier to shop, follow your stocks, do business, play games, and look at dirty pictures. Trying to get political information from the Internet is a little bit like trying to get a drink from a fire hose. Great for junkies; too much for most folks.

Voting keeps getting easier, but voter turnout keeps going down. That's been the history of the past 40 years. The problem isn't mechanics; it's motivation and it's not clear how

VOTE.COM
By Dick Morris
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