

The century of violence

By THOMAS G. PALAIMA

Forget millennia. How many of us can evaluate the second millennium? None of us has lived through enough of it, and few of us have the historical, philosophical, theological or scientific knowledge needed to figure out what it has meant. And who knows what the third millennium will be like? Even visionaries such as George Orwell and Stanley Kubrick could not project further than the 30-odd years between 1949 and 1984 or between 1968 and 2001, and they both overestimated where human beings would be technologically, socially, politically and humanly.

If the computer experts are correct, we are on the verge of grappling with the Hal problem, but NASA's recent failure on Mars suggests that any struggles we are likely to have with beyond-human-intelligence computers in 2001 or 2010 will take place on terra firma and not anywhere near a humming monolith beyond our galaxy. The one historical figure this century with enough hubris to attempt a prognostication one millennium into the future was Riechskanzler Adolf Hitler. Fortunately the collective will and resources of the 'greatest generation' of Americans and their allies saw to it that his prediction of a thousand-year Reich was disproved in fewer than 20.

Predicting even a century forward in these times of ours is a dicey business. The science fiction of H.G. Wells intersected with fact in this century in his 1901 novels "The First Men in the Moon" and "The War in the Air." But his singular imagination could produce nothing to exceed the senseless and muddy carnage of trench warfare, and so he was seduced into predicting that World War I would be "the war that will end war." He lived too long and learned about the systematic attempt to exterminate the Jewish people and the sudden flashes over Hiroshima and Nagasaki that incinerated and mangled buildings and bodies and left many civilian survivors to die in excruciating pain from radiation poisoning.

It is hardly a proud achievement of our Western-dominated century to have coined the word genocide for the Nuremberg Trials, and then to have had to use it in connection with Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo as the century draws to its close. The mass murders of the Stalinist purges had not yet been revealed,



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In this millennium

when a deeply disillusioned Wells declared, "Reality has taken a leaf from my book and set itself to supersede me."

Paul Simon was right 15 years ago and is still right. These are "days of miracle and wonder." But advances in technology, medicine, communications and material comforts have done nothing to lessen the capacity of human beings to wreak violence upon one another. We can take a rather perverse pride in our state of Texas for being on the cutting edge of trends in violent behavior. The assassination of JFK in Dallas in November 1963 got our nation and our world used to the shock and the sorrow that would accompany news about MLK from Memphis and RFK from Los Angeles later in the decade. Charles Whitman in the University of Texas Tower in 1966 teamed with Richard Speck in Chicago to introduce us to the peculiarly American phenomenon of mass-murder that has taken us through Charles Manson and Jeffrey Dahmer right into the workplace and school-house killings of the late '90s.

This month, teen-agers opened up with gunfire on fellow students in Fort Gibson, Okla., and Veghel, the Netherlands. These incidents were covered in news-in-brief items on pages 2 and 3 of the American-Statesman and Daily Texan. Both of these acts would have grabbed wide front-page coverage as late as the 1980's. Now they are commonplaces grouped with "what-else-is-new?" reports of the USDA squandering funds and AT&T promising to share high-speed Internet lines. As Jesse Pasadoble, the Vietnam vet public defense lawyer in Alfredo Vea's brilliant new novel "gods go begging" reminds us, "There are seventy-five wars going on in this world right now, and only one of them matches the homicide rate in this country."

Among the books you are reading or giving during the holidays include any of those on violence by Dr. James Gilligan, former director of mental health for the Massachusetts prison system. He tells us how much is at stake and why the right address and the best personal intentions cannot protect any of us from one of the defining characteristics of the 20th century. Let us hope and work for peace in all of our homes and in all of our lives in the new millennium.

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