

Thursday, January 6th, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

HIGHS AND LOWS, INS AND OUTS GOOD RIDDANCE TO 2004

It seems like every newspaper and commentator makes a year-end list of the stories of the past 12 months. Good and Bad. Who's **IN** and who's **OUT**. Actually, sometimes it's better to be **OUT** than **IN**. Just ask me. Two years ago, I was **IN** (during my six month vacation) when I would have much rather been **OUT**.

As we start off the New Year, I decided to take a look back at some of the more embarrassing news of the past year. So what were some of the low points of 2004? Here's my top ten list:

10) The Scott Peterson case. This whole sordid melodrama has ended up as the longest-running reality TV show in America. Cable TV junkies have been following this case daily for more than two years. MSNBC's Dan Abrams has built his career trying to peel away the layers of this tawdry mystery. It seems like the media almost establishes a template for this kind of psycho-drama. We started out with O.J. and Nicole, then Gary Condit and Chandra Levy, and on to little JonBenet Ramsey and whoever killed her. Thousands of other less compelling cases will be left to obscurity. But the appetite for sensationalized scandal will compel the national media to find another case of obsession that will let us all, once more, serve on surrogate juries. Many of us can hardly wait.

9) Louisiana Flu Shots. The small supply of flu vaccine available to Louisiana residents is still being rationed. Unless you are older, younger or sick, you and I must wait and hope the warm weather continues. That is, unless you have even the slightest relationship to LSU. Our flagship university has been handing out the limited vaccine to anyone who is enrolled, works there or is related to someone associated with the school. To heck with priorities and the needs of more high risk folks. LSU gets a brickbat for this one.

8) Our farcical display of democracy. Our national elections are viewed throughout the world as a mixture of lawyers at the ballot boxes brandishing pre-written lawsuits alleging violations of obscure election laws that vary from state to state. Both parties often pull every dirty legal trick to get thousands of citizens' votes thrown out. Then, thanks to the Electoral College system, the whole thing can come down to the votes in one precinct of one county or parish in one state. A country of 300 million could have its presidency decided by the number of people it takes to fill Phil's Oyster Bar in Baton Rouge. We probably should just outsource the next national election to India.

7) Victims of tornado-ravaged Olla, Louisiana have been waiting for months for help from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), after numerous homes were completely destroyed. Many of the damaged homes had no insurance, yet no word has come from Washington as to whether these folks will receive any federal aid. But if you live in Florida, checks are being handed out left and right.

Allegations are rampant that thousands of residents in the Miami area are receiving FEMA checks without receiving any storm damage. The South Florida Sun-Sentinel quoted residents as saying, "My neighbors see a chance to get free money. They damage things themselves and say it was damage from the storm...free money." So Olla residents, who suffered devastating damage, get nothing. While in Florida, the money pours in...whether one deserves it or not. A good "first" issue for newly elected Republican Senator Vitter.

6) I was really worried about this one. Thank goodness Bill O'Reilly settled his sexual harassment lawsuit for (according to the New York Daily News) \$2 million. The thought of hearing his taped conversations played over and over again on the radio and TV would have been more than America could take. "Falafel" phone sex with Bill O'Reilly? It's just too much to put our country through during these emotional times. But it's all over now. ("I'll never speak of it again.") Great. Now we can get back to Reilly's daily tirades telling us about moral values and how we should live our lives.

5) It was surreal. Almost like Oliver Twist asking for more food. "Please Sir, May I have some armor?" One of our soldiers was tired of scrounging for pieces of rusted scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass that's already been shot up, dropped and busted. Our troops in the field call it "hillbilly armor." But for many, that's all they had. The answer to the soldier's question? "You go to war with the army you have." Lame. Really lame. Wasn't the timetable for invading Iraq dictated by politics, not military necessity? These troops have been forced to endure much more than they bargained for. For goodness sake, replace that "hillbilly armor."

4) And equal justice for all. Don't believe that for a minute. In Tangipahoa Parish, there is a call for the district judge to step down because she allegedly assaulted an inmate in her courtroom. The case is still under investigation by the local district attorney as well as the state Attorney General's office. As well it should be. If true, the judge has no business sitting on the bench. Now flash to September 29th, 2000. Federal courthouse in Baton Rouge. My lawyer was physically assaulted in the judge's chambers while the federal judge, Edith Clement, sat and watched. He was attacked by a federal prosecutor. And nothing happened. Nothing. A full account of the disreputable event can be found in my new book, *JUSTICE DENIED*. In this case, justice was blind. Blind as to a crime that took place, yet nothing was done.

3) A "Saturday night massacre" on our privacy. That's what happened when both Democrats and Republicans joined together on Saturday, November 20th of last year to rush through a spending bill that gave lawmakers direct access to your income tax returns. No, I'm not making this up. The proposed law, a major spending bill, gave

lawmakers on the House and Senate appropriations committees access to Internal Revenue Service facilities or “any tax returns or return information contained therein.” In other words, full access to your income tax information. Congressional leaders blamed “sloppy drafting” by congressional aides and the IRS. When the howls from good government groups were raised, the language was taken out. Just shows that even your favorite member of Congress needs to be monitored. Not one hew or cry was raised from our representatives. Thank goodness there is someone on the outside watching the henhouse.

2) It’s a moment none of us will forget. In years to come, everyone will remember exactly where they were when it happened. And thank goodness for TiVo if you were one of the few who missed it. This nation was traumatized by an event that lasted no longer than a few tenths of a second. But it polarized the national psyche and caused a mini-revolution in media censorship. You could even argue this traumatic event energized the values crowd and made a significant difference in the Bush election victory. Four words. Janet Jackson’s right nipple. Her “wardrobe malfunction” consumed us. Is this a great country or what!

1) And finally, hands down, the year’s number one story. It was a bold move that consumed massive manpower, cost millions of dollars, and required a determination and commitment for those involved that seemed almost Herculean. But we all know it was worth the untold cost. And as a nation, we valiantly rose to the occasion. No, we did not get Osama bin Laden. He’s still at large and we have absolutely no idea where he is. But thank the Good Lord. Our number one accomplishment for the year? (Makes us all so proud!) We got Martha. She’s off the streets, so (for the few months she has left on her jail term) we can all sleep more soundly.

**“We do not like to be told what to do,
especially not by the federal government.”**
Julia Reed-“Queen of the Turtle Derby”

**“I hate to read. I don’t get anything out of it.
I never could stand to read. It bores me.”**
Susan Akin, Miss Mississippi and Miss America, 1986.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown