

## SO WHAT ARE YOU DOIN' NEW YEAR'S EVE?

**Thursday, December 30, 2004**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

Well I'm doin' a lot better than I was two years ago today. Back then, it was still "vacation time" at Oakdale. This year will be a quiet dinner at a favorite local restaurant with a few close friends. A good year ahead to look forward to. But to keep it all in proper perspective, I'm taking the liberty of repeating my Oakdale column from a pretty lonely New Year's Eve. Much too recent and vivid to put aside. Take a minute and look back with me.

**January 1st, 2003**  
**DAY SEVENTY-FIVE**  
**Federal Prison Camp**  
**Oakdale , Louisiana**

### CONTINUING NOTES FROM FEDERAL PRISON

Did you make a New Year's resolution yet? I always do. Hope and foreboding are at the top of my list; and have been these past few years. The new year always brings a promise of uncertainty. More so for me this year. I would rather be absorbed with the more mundane things in life. But that is not to be.

One resolution I make each year is to maintain my curiosity. It does not matter how limited your perspective or the scope of your surroundings may be, there is (or should be) something to wet your interest and strike your fancy. The inmates around me, the absurdity of my being here, the efficiencies and inefficiencies of the federal prison system, the stars in the sky. I discovered early on that there are two kinds of people; those who are curious about the world around them, and those whose shallow attentions are generally limited to those things that pertain to their own personal well-being. I just hope all those I care about fall into the former category.

And a resolution of hope. Successful and fulfilling endeavors for my children, happiness and contentment for family and friends, the fortitude to handle this terrible and unfair tragedy in my life with dignity.

I asked each of my children to give me two gifts for Christmas. First, to make a donation to a charity that will help needy families. And second, to read the unforgettable holocaust novel *Night* , by Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace laureate who survived the Nazi death camps. To help deal with what happened to me, I have a Wiesel quote taped above my bunk bed.

*To defeat injustice and misfortune,  
if only for one instant, for a single victim,*

*is to invent a new reason for hope.*

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How was my first (and only ever again) New Year's Eve in federal prison? Well, I certainly have had better celebrations. But actually, a lot is going on here. There have been holiday religious services all last week, with even caroling throughout the prison. Sports tournaments galore are taking place: basketball, softball, horseshoes, and weight lifting contests. There are ping-pong, chess, checkers and domino competitions. The winners get six packs of soda and power aide. I tried to stir up support in an over 60's track meet. But I couldn't get much interest from the other three guys in my age group.

Last night, we even welcomed the New Year with "Auld Lang Syne." Did you know this song is sung at the stroke of midnight in almost every English-speaking country in the world to bring in the new year? It's an old Scotch tune, written by my favorite historical poet, Robert Burns in the 1700's. (I'm Scottish, so there's a bond here.) "Auld Lang Syne" literally means "old long ago," or simply, "the good old days."

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot  
And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot  
And days of auld lang syne?  
And here's a hand, my trusty friend  
And gie's a hand o' thine  
We'll take a cup of kindness yet  
For auld lang syne.*

I can look back on a number of memorable New Year's Eve celebrations. In recent years, Gladys and I have joined a gathering of family and friends in New Orleans at Antoine's Restaurant in the French Quarter. Our private party normally gathers in the Rex Room for a complete dinner including an array of seafood appetizers (oysters, shrimp and crabmeat) and Baked Alaska for dessert. A number of champagne-filled toasts with an occasional family member (often sister-in-law Gloria) dancing on the dinner table. Then off to join the masses for the New Year's countdown to midnight in Jackson Square . We often finish the evening (or early morning) at Jimmy Buffet's Margarita Ville on Decatur Street .

When my daughters were quite young, we spent a number of New Years at a family camp on Davis Island , in the middle of the Mississippi River some 30 miles below Vicksburg . On several occasions, the only people there were my family and Bishop Charles P. Greco, who was the Catholic Bishop for central and north Louisiana . Bishop Greco had baptized all three of my daughters, and had been a family friend for

years. And he did love to deer hunt.

On many a cold and rainy morning, the handful of us at the camp would rise before dawn for the Bishop to conduct a New Year's Mass. After the service, most of the family went back to bed. I would crank up my old jeep, and take the Bishop out in the worst weather with hopes of putting him on a stand where a large buck would pass. No matter what the weather, he would stay all morning with his shotgun and thermos of coffee. He rarely got a deer, but oh how he loved to be there in the woods. Now I'm not a Catholic, but he treated me as one of his own.

One of the most fulfilling and rewarding projects I took on in my state senate days was to help Bishop Greco fund and build the St. Mary's Residential and Training School for retarded children in Alexandria. He was, for me, a great mentor and friend who touched the lives of so many. He died in 1987, and I will always think of him on New Year's Day.

I will be working in the kitchen New Year's Day. It's a holiday for the inmates. But they have to eat, and somebody has to cook. You can bet I will be fixing black-eyed peas as well as cabbage. And don't bet I won't find the dime in the peas. After all, I'm going to put it there.

(Back to the future here. After this column appeared on the internet, the warden ordered a guard at the Oakdale prison to search my locker. You see, it is against the rules to have any money in one's possession. My column in prison was always read by the prison staff within hours after being posted on the web. These guarded souls in charge actually thought I had a dime "stashed" back in my locker. Just goes to show you the mentality and mental capacity of those in charge of our penal institutions.)

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## BOOKNOTES

I just finished reading *Bush at War*, written by Bob Woodward of Washington Post fame. I have read a number of his books, all which are written more in the style of a novelist rather than a journalist.

My favorite Woodward book is *Shadow* that describes how the legacy of Nixon's Watergate affected the governing style of the previous five presidents. *Shadow* by the way, describes at length the work of the special prosecutor in the Iran-Contra investigation during the late 1980's. The handwritten notes of both Presidents Reagan and Bush were subpoenaed over their objections. They only wanted to produce the typewritten version of their notes. But the court said no. The **handwritten notes** had to be produced.

Now follow me on this. Two United States Presidents had to produce their handwritten notes. The obvious reason was that the court wanted the notes or what actually happened—the whole truth. Do you see a contradiction here? The FBI agent in my case would not hand over his handwritten notes. He knew these notes would back up my statements and set me free. Blatant unequal justice in America .

Forgive me for getting off track, but I'm sure you can understand my anger over the unfairness of what happened to me.

Back to *Bush at War*. Obviously, Woodward is a reporter who has done his homework. He describes the three months following 9/11 and the almost daily response from the President and those key players around him. Over 100 interviews of key participants including a four-hour interview with President Bush. If journalism is considered the rough draft of history, Woodward has done a good job of being first to start the historical process.

Bush comes across well; a man of action and self-described “gut-player.” If you want to know a nearly day-by-day account of how key decisions were made, this is the book to read.

I have two complaints. First, as the process continued, I became worn down with the minutiae. Perhaps it's because so much has been written about 9/11. But I became distracted by the details of meetings day-after-day before decisions were reached.

And second, I wonder about too much sensitive information being made public before many of the plans have been carried out. Remember that we still don't have the slightest idea where bin Laden is located, and have no clue as to the anthrax killers. As Newt Gingrich complained in *The Wall Street Journal*, “It makes no sense for an administration that has jealously guarded its executive privilege to allow a reporter the access it denies to members of Congress.”

I'm also not sure how completely objective Woodward is. He seems to minimize any failings of the Bush administration, and this should concern us as we prepare to go to war in Iraq. Too much access?

If more detailed information on 9/11 is your thing, then Woodward's account is certainly the most comprehensive first draft of the Bush legacy.

A final thought since this whole subject matter is about the war on terrorism. Several recent appointments by the President caught my eye.

Elliott Abrams was a key advisor in the Reagan administration. He has been named as a high-ranking Middle East advisor by the Bush administration. The *Washington Post* reported that Abrams pleaded guilty to lying to Congress. He admitted to withholding information from a Senate Committee and then a House Committee. No big deal

apparently. He's back helping to run our foreign policy.

And Admiral Poindexter is back. Remember him? He was the National Security Advisor under Reagan. A jury convicted Poindexter in 1990 on five felony counts of misleading Congress and making false statements. He now has been appointed by the Bush administration to head up the "Information Awareness Office." As William Safire in the *New York Times* wrote: "Poindexter is now realizing his twenty-five year dream: getting the "data-mining power to snoop on every public and private act of every American."

So we now have two major national officials having made false statements, yet running key government agencies in Washington, D.C. Yet I sit here in a federal prison, even though the prosecutors have the information (the handwritten notes) that would set me free.

Is this a great government, or what?

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Since I have written so much about 9/11, I want to end this column with another poem. I included a few weeks ago a poem by my fellow inmate, Troy Rogers, called "G-Town" here at Oakdale. He gave me a new poem this week about American's tragedy. Whatever these inmates have done, they still love their country.

Happy New Year to you and all your family. May 2003 be a better year for us all. It certainly will be for me.

Peace and Justice,

Jim Brown

### *MY COUNTRY TEARS*

*9/11 was a sad and horrifying day.  
All Americans strongly felt this way.  
Lives of so many innocent and decent  
People were lost.  
Bin Laden and his evil ones must pay  
The cost.  
The sights we saw, our eyes could not believe.  
It's hard to understand how such evil was conceived.*

*Our country we love, was knocked to its knees.  
But we stood as Americans together.  
In a way the world could not believe.  
To the loved ones of those who perished that day.  
Our nation will not let their memories fade away.  
We must and shall avenge them in a bold American way.*

*Troy Rogers , a/k/a "G Town"*

*Dedicated to the families of 9/11 and America*