

An interesting, scary year

THERE'S an old proverb claimed by many of the world's cultures which goes like this: "May you be cursed with an interesting life." Well, we've certainly had an interesting and scary year. It all began, way back when, it seems like another life ago, George W. Bush was inaugurated yet again as U.S. president. Back then it appeared that, at least, he was actually elected this time around, relieving me from the grammatically awkward challenge of not using the word "president" to describe the occupant of the White House.

As 2005 wore on, however, striking evidence of irregularities last year in Ohio's presidential election have thrown the legitimacy of the Bush presidency back into question. The corporate media paid scant attention as congressional hearings unearthed evidence of suppressed minority votes and counting irregularities, relegating this story as the responsibility of future historians.

This year will also go down in history as the year of torture – not so much because it happens, but because it is now shamelessly celebrated as official U.S. government policy. If there's any silver lining here, it's that the Neanderthals in the White House seem to have suddenly propelled themselves forward into the Dark Ages. Hallowed institutions now seriously debate the "merits" of torture as an interrogation technique.

If this doesn't make you proud to be an American as we move into the 21st Century, how about the fact that the Kyoto Protocols, a rather impotent measure to curb greenhouse gases and global warming, has been instituted without the participation of the United States? On a darkly positive note, however, the issue of global warming has

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finally emerged as a national topic of debate – though seemingly still a taboo topic for TV meteorologists. It wasn't our shameful failure to ratify Kyoto, due in large part to our auto industry's gluttonous insistence at continuing to market and promote SUVs, that propelled this story into the news. It was the year's record breaking number of hurricanes and the ensuing destruction of New Orleans that finally woke us up. Yes, there were 26 named Atlantic storms this year – five more than the previous record. And yes, we're running at ten times the average for Category Five Hurricanes. But who expected the science fiction-esque scenario of a submerged city to actually play itself out first here in America?

Of course, the Katrina story is far more complicated than just a monster storm submerging an American city, claiming what many see as global warming's first apocalyptic casualty. The city was actually the victim of an arrogant disregard for nature, resulting in massive and irresponsible hydraulic engineering projects. And there were the levees that failed due to lack of maintenance, due to lack of funding, due to tax cuts and war expenditures. Combined, the destruction of New Orleans revealed an overall warped sense of national priorities.

The federal and local government's response to the storm also demonstrated to the country and the world the horrifically shameful reality that racism and classism are both still alive and thriving in the United States. When the levee first failed, flooding the historic predominantly African-American city, I wrote that what we were seeing in New Orleans was "ethnic cleansing." Though my story was generally well received, there were a few complaints that my language was "too strong." Over the ensuing months, however, events unfolded that supported my initial choice of words. False media reports of mayhem in black communities led to suspension of rescue efforts. Fleeing black residents were turned back at gunpoint as they tried to escape their flooded city. Evacuees were herded like cattle and shipped off to points unknown while military troops pointed weapons at flood survivors trying to stay in their homes. New Orleans' black population, like its white population, is now spread across the country as a Diaspora. The main difference is that there doesn't seem to be any right of return for many, if not most, of the black folks. A new New Orleans is emerging – and it's going to be white.

Weapons of Mass Destruction, for the umpteenth year, have held a top national news spot. Only this year, the story isn't who allegedly has them, but who, it turns out, didn't. Yes, the WMD story that the Bush administration used as its justification for going to war was a total fabrication. Of course, for those of us who look beyond the American corporate media for our news, this wasn't news at all. I heard the former U.N. weapons inspector and U.S. Marine Intelligence Officer Scott Ridder make this claim in 2002 before we invaded Iraq. And there were hundreds of well sourced stories in the

international media and the U.S. alternative media that supported Ridder's claims. What's noteworthy about 2005, however, is that this story has finally been covered by the corporate media – 120,000 lives and \$228 billion too late.

What we're seeing here is poll-driven reporting. The corporate media is in business to sell widgets and SUVs, not to break stories. They must, however, follow stories that have already broken, otherwise they expose themselves as the shameless stooges that they are. And while they are loath to go against a popular national trend, however fascistic it may be, they are also quick to follow public opinion, lest they expose themselves for the whores they are. This is the real story concerning the Iraq War. Public opinion has turned against the war, and hence, journalists now have wiggle room to actually cover some of its most critical stories – like the epidemic of torture, the fabricated evidence that brought us to war, and the White House-supported emergence of death squads.

This all brings us to Cindy Sheehan – the grieving Gold Star mother whom historians will eventually canonize. Sheehan took on the war when it, and Bush, still maintained a modicum of media-driven popularity. Unrelenting, she exposed the moral bankruptcy of the Bush administration in a way that not even the American media could ignore. Time magazine chose the world's richest couple, Bill and Melinda Gates, and Bono, as its People of the Year, honoring them for their humanitarian efforts. With all due respect to Bono, my Person of the Year award has to go to Sheehan – not for her politics per se, but for the inspiration she has given us by showing that one person can, indeed, make a difference and maybe even change the world. She's 2005's Mother Jones and Granny D all wrapped up into one awkward but potent package. We find similar inspirational stories in this year's temporary defeat of Bush's plan to privatize Social Security and in the growing anti Wal-Mart movement.

This year also saw the exposure of more evidence documenting that U.S. forces have been targeting and killing international journalists who have been reporting critically about the United States – a policy that began in 1999 when Bill Clinton ordered the bombing of Serbia's national radio and TV network. As we go to press, evidence is emerging that George W. Bush had hoped to do the same to Al Jazeera by bombing their corporate headquarters in Qatar. The only twist is that we are not at war with our ally, Qatar. Bush never was too good with figuring out the nuances of that foreign policy stuff.

Other unforgettable headlines:

— We finally saw Terri Schiavo laid to rest; the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. can no longer execute people who committed their capital crimes as children; oil companies made record profits in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, only to get tax breaks from the

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Bush administration; the National Security Agency and the military are now illegally spying on American citizens in the U.S.; With the Bushistas distracted in Iraq, democratic socialism is sweeping across Latin America.

— We still have no plan to confront a possible outbreak of Avian Flu; Republicans are getting indicted all over the place for a slew of different felonies; The global institution of marriage took a step forward with South Africa becoming the fifth country to lift its ban on gay marriages; George Bush's pick, the spooky looking John Roberts, gets appointed to the Supreme Court with the acquiescence of a bunch of Quisling Democrats; U.S. ally Saudi Arabia held its first ever elections – for a piddly local office – restricting voting rights to male citizens.

— Congress passed a tax cut package which, according to the Brookings Institution Tax Policy Center, will bestow 54 percent of the tax savings on the richest two tenths of one percent of Americans – those “earning” over one million dollars per year. In all, 97 percent of the booty will go to the richest 3.7 percent of households – those with annual incomes of \$200,000 or more. Working Americans will once again get squat.

Finally, George W. Bush has made it another year without getting impeached by the Republican-controlled Congress and Senate. I suppose that's because nobody ever gave him a blow job.