Bad Days in History

A GLEEFULLY GRIM CHRONICLE of MISFORTUNE, MAYHEM, and MISERY for EVERY DAY of the YEAR

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“January, month of empty pockets! Let us endure this evil month, anxious as a theatrical producer’s forehead.”
—Colette

JANUARY 1

Crappy New Year!

Ah, New Year’s: a day filled with new hope and fresh starts—except when it wasn’t. For some unfortunates in history, January 1 was a dead end. And a rather ghastly one. Take the fifth-century monk and martyr Telemachus, who stepped into the middle of a gladiatorial fight in Rome and tried to stop the human slaughter, only to be stoned to death by the bloodthirsty audience unappreciative of the effort. Or Charles II of Navarre, known as “the Bad,” who in 1387 burned to
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dead in his own bed after an attendant accidentally ignited the brandy-soaked bandages with which the king had been bound head to foot as a remedy for his ailments.

Then there was Louis XII of France, who, though aging and decrepit, was lucky enough to wed a young and beautiful English princess, Henry VIII’s younger sister, Mary, in 1514. Alas, the vigorous attempts to sire an heir proved too much for the gouty old king, and he dropped dead from exhaustion just three months after the wedding. Yet unlike those others whose grim demise fell on the New Year, at least Louis had fun on the way out.

JANUARY 2, 1811

Swatting the Gadfly
Who Stung With the Truth

Timothy Pickering was an early American pest; a persistent, self-righteous mosquito who, among other offenses, urged the secession of New England and assiduously undermined the first four U.S. presidents. He called George Washington “a much overrated, semi-literate mediocrity.” John Adams was forced to fire him as secretary of state because of his disloyalty to the administration—and after that he stubbornly refused to resign. Indeed, Pickering was so obnoxious even his own biographer couldn’t stand him. But it wasn’t just his odious personality that earned the obscure Founding Father his most enduring distinction: being the first of only nine U.S. senators ever officially censured. That happened because Timothy Pickering dared to tell the truth.

On October 27, 1810, President James Madison issued a proclamation declaring the annexation of West Florida, a Spanish possession, claiming the region had been part of the Louisiana Purchase. Pickering objected to such a unilateral exercise of executive power.
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In typical gadfly fashion, he produced before the Senate an old document from France’s then foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, stating emphatically that West Florida was not part of the Louisiana Purchase. Only problem was, the document had yet to be declassified—despite the fact that it dated back to the Jefferson Administration. Revealing the classified document was a petty violation, but Pickering’s enemies pounced on it.

Henry Clay, the aggressively expansionist senator from Kentucky, introduced a resolution of censure. Pickering called it a “put-up affair,” which indeed it was. Had the motion been made against someone less unpleasant to his peers, it probably wouldn’t have passed. But Pickering was Pickering, and on January 2, 1811, he became the first entry in the Senate’s official annals of infamy.

JANUARY 3, 1977

Apple Dumpling: A Co-Founder’s Small Sliver of the Pie

Ronald Wayne considered himself a lucky man when Apple Computers was incorporated on January 3, 1977. Not because of the potential windfall, but because he had extricated himself months earlier from what he considered a potentially risky partnership with Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. As the company’s co-founder, as well as the most mature and experienced of the three, Wayne had been given a 10 percent stake to essentially serve as Apple’s parent, charged with keeping the two other eccentric geniuses under control. But that, as Wayne later recounted, “was like having a tiger by the tail.” Two of them, actually, and as the only partner with any assets that could be seized, Wayne decided that the risk was too hazardous. So he was grateful to be set free, and with a check for
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$800 to boot! That amount more than doubled when, to avoid any potential legal issues, the new company formally bought out the old. The co-founder thought he was flush with cash, and though his relinquished slice of the Apple pie eventually became worth in excess of $30 billion, Wayne always insisted he wasn’t bitter. As he told the U.K.’s Daily Mail in 2013, “If I had stayed with Apple and accepted the limitations on my philosophy of life I could have well ended up the richest man in the cemetery.” Instead, Wayne remained alive and well, selling stamps and coins out of his mobile home in Nevada. And collecting Social Security.

JANUARY 4, 1903

Topsy’s Last Stand: The Shocking Execution of an Elephant

Amid the frenzy of invention and astonishing technological advances that characterized the later 19th century, Thomas Edison launched what became known as the War of Currents. It was a ferocious campaign against the use of alternating current (AC)—a system of electricity distribution, perfected by the inventor’s onetime employee Nikola Tesla and backed by George Westinghouse—that threatened to make obsolete Edison’s own direct current (DC) system in powering American homes and industry. Money and prestige were both at stake, and the Wizard of Menlo Park wasn’t about to lose either.

Contrary to his folksy image, the famed inventor was absolutely ruthless in his efforts to discredit the rival system of alternating current, which he sought to portray as being just as lethal as lightning. To that end, Edison’s associates staged a number of unsavory public spectacles in which dogs and other animals were electrocuted using the dreaded rival current.
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The war reached its grotesque climax in 1890 when Edison used his considerable influence to ensure that convicted ax murderer William Kemmler would be executed by the newfangled electric chair. Of course, alternating current would be used to demonstrate just how dreadful it could be. Edison, in fact, coined the term for death by electric chair as being “Westinghoused,” hoping it would enter the national vernacular. It didn’t.

By the beginning of 1903, the War of Currents was all but lost as Edison’s DC system was rapidly eclipsed. Still, the ever inventive Wizard conjured one last stunt to prove to the world that alternating current would be the bane of mankind. A misbehaving circus elephant named Topsy had killed three of her handlers—one of them after he put a lit cigarette in her mouth. Such aggression could no longer be tolerated, and it was decided that Topsy would have to die for her crimes. The plan was to publicly hang her at Coney Island. But when the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals objected, Edison suggested Topsy be “Westinghoused” instead. And so on the appointed day, January 4, 1903—in what The New York Times described as “a rather inglorious affair”—the homicidal pachyderm was felled in front of a huge crowd by a 6,600-volt AC charge. And Edison, who had staged the whole sordid episode, captured it all with one of his greatest inventions: the motion picture camera.

January 5, 1895

Stripped of All Dignity:
The Dreyfus Affair

It was just one episode in the prolonged saga of miscarried justice and virulent anti-Semitism that was known as the Dreyfus Affair. But for a man of honor, it was perhaps the most agonizing.
On the morning of January 5, 1895, Alfred Dreyfus, an artillery captain of Jewish descent attached to the French General Staff, having been secretly court-martialed and convicted of treason based on manufactured evidence, was forced to undergo an excruciating ritual of degradation before being shipped off to serve a life sentence on the fearsome penal colony Devil’s Island.

At 9 a.m., Dreyfus was marched into the center of the École Militaire courtyard, where, before representatives of all France’s armed forces and stands full of distinguished guests, his self-described “horrible torture” began. “I suffered agonizingly, but held myself erect with all my strength,” he recalled. “To sustain me I called up the memory of my wife and children.”

The sentence of degradation was read aloud, after which Dreyfus suddenly cried out to his comrades, “Soldiers! . . . I am innocent, I swear that I am innocent. I remain worthy of serving in the army. Long live France! Long live the army!”

Despite his protests, guards stripped Dreyfus of his buttons, braids, and epaulets until his uniform was bare of decoration. Then, as the final humiliation in what one witness described as “a more exciting spectacle than the guillotine,” they broke his saber in two. The ceremony ended with a parade—a walk of shame. “I was compelled to make the whole round of the square,” Dreyfus recounted. “I heard the howls of the deluded mob, I felt the thrill which I knew must be running through those people, since they believed that before them was a convicted traitor to France; and I struggled to transmit to their hearts another thrill—belief in my innocence.”

After five years spent rotting on Devil’s Island, and many more years struggling to rehabilitate his good name, Dreyfus was eventually officially exonerated in the affair that came to sharply divide France. But the French military that had framed him was never quite reconciled to its own dishonor, and in 1985 it rejected a statue of Dreyfus—holding his broken sword—that was to be placed in the École Militaire courtyard where the much maligned
soldier had been so cruelly dishonored. Defaced with the slogan “Dirty Jew” in 2002, the memorial now stands forlorn on an obscure Parisian traffic island.

JANUARY 6, 1540

Sooo Not Hot: Henry VIII Meets His Match, Kills His Matchmaker

Thomas Cromwell was Henry VIII’s most adept henchman. He was the ruthless engineer of the English king’s divorce from his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, his split from Rome, and the destruction of his second wife, Anne Boleyn. But as a matchmaker, Henry’s otherwise able minister was a dismal failure—a shortcoming that would cost him his head.

Henry had married three times for love, but after the death of his third queen, Jane Seymour, the king’s influential minister determined a political match was in order to help shore up England’s Protestant alliances in Germany. Cromwell settled on Anne, a princess from the duchy of Cleves. And though he had never set eyes on her, Henry agreed to the match based on the glowing reports of her beauty and grace he had received from his closest adviser and others—as well as a somewhat flattering portrait of the princess by the court painter Hans Holbein.

Having successfully finessed the political alliance with Cleves, Cromwell anxiously awaited his master’s romantic response to his handiwork. It was not a good one. Henry had eagerly set off to the coast to meet his intended and, as he put it, “to nourish love.” But upon first seeing Anne, the king blanched. “I like her not!” he stormed ominously, no doubt leaving Cromwell quaking.

What exactly it was about poor Anne of Cleves that so repelled the king remains a mystery. Perhaps it was simply chemistry—an
intangible quality that would have been impossible for Cromwell to
detect or convey. All that is certain is that Henry was very unhappy.
“I see nothing in this woman as men report of her,” he fumed, “and
I marvel that wise men would make such report as they have done!”
To Cromwell he railed, “If I had known so much before, she had no
coming hither [to England]. But what remedy now?”

Unfortunately, there was no remedy without imperiling the vital
Cleves alliance. King Henry VIII, a monarch whose will was rarely
thwarted, now found himself stuck: “If it were not that she had
come so far into my realm, and the great preparations and state
that my people have made for her, and for fear of making a ruffle in
the world and of driving her brother into the arms of the Emperor
and the French King, I would not now marry her. But now it is too
far gone, wherefore I am sorry.”

Having placed his master’s “neck into the yoke,” as Henry put
it, Cromwell could only meekly offer his regrets that the king was
“no better content.”

By his wedding day on January 6, 1540, Henry had hardly mel-
lowed to the idea of Anne. “My lords,” he said, pausing in front of
the chapel at Greenwich Palace, “if it were not to satisfy the world
and my realm, I would not do this day what I must do this day for
any earthly thing.” And if Cromwell hoped the king’s mood might
improve after he actually bedded Anne, he was sorely disappointed
the next morning.

“I liked her before not well,” Henry told him, “but now I like
her much worse.” Indeed, the king made it clear that the wedding
night had been exceedingly unsexy. “I have felt her belly and her
breast and thereby, as I can judge, she should be no maid, which
so struck me to the heart when I felt them, that I had neither will
nor courage to proceed further in other matters. I left her as good
a maid as I found her.”

Mercifully, Anne never felt the sting of her new husband’s rejec-
tion because, having been overly sheltered as a young woman, she
was entirely ignorant about what was supposed to have happened.
Henry made no effort to educate her further, which, given how fat and ornery he had become, was probably a blessing. Still, it did make Anne look a little silly, believing as she did that her marriage was fully realized.

“Why, when he comes to bed he kisseth me,” she told her senior ladies-in-waiting, “and taketh me by the hand, and biddeth me ‘Goodnight, sweetheart’; and in the morning kisseth me and biddeth ‘Farewell, darling’... Is this not enough?”

It was left to one of the women to explain to the queen that, no, it wasn’t enough at all. “Madam,” she said, “there must be more than this, or it will be long ere we have a Duke of York [a second son for the king], which all this realm most desireth.”

Six months after this farce of a marriage began, Henry had it annulled on the grounds on non-consummation, as well as an
alleged premarital contract Anne’s family had arranged with someone else. Wisely, the king’s fourth wife willingly agreed to the dissolution of her marriage, in return for which the grateful king handsomely rewarded her with a hefty settlement and superior status at court as his “good sister.”

Cromwell, however, wasn’t so lucky. While the king did elevate his lowly born chief minister, the son of an alehouse keeper, to the status of an earl in the aftermath of the Cleves debacle, it was merely a prelude (and perhaps a setup) for his ultimate undoing. The nobles of the realm, always resentful of the power and influence of the upstart Cromwell, now violently turned against him.

The once mighty minister was arrested on a false charge of heresy, and from his prison cell in the Tower of London he provided valuable testimony in the king’s effort to shed his fourth wife. It was his last service to the sovereign he had helped make all-powerful. Less than three weeks after Henry’s marriage to Anne of Cleves was annulled, Cromwell was beheaded on July 28, 1540—his pleas for “mercy, mercy, mercy” ignored.

With his head impaled on a spike atop London Bridge, the fallen minister could take no comfort in Henry’s eventual change of heart, nor in the king’s lament, reported by the French ambassador, that “he had put to death the most faithful servant he ever had.”

JANUARY 7, 1945

Blather of the Bulge: The Fool Monty

I
t was the last gasp of Hitler’s dying Third Reich, an unexpected, exceptionally violent thrust through the thinly defended Allied lines in southern Belgium that became known as the Battle of the Bulge. And though U.S. forces bore the brunt of the ferocious attack—bravely striking back under horrific conditions in
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the biggest and bloodiest single battle ever fought by American soldiers—it was the pompous British field marshal Bernard Law Montgomery who stepped forward in a press conference on January 7, 1945, to take undeserved credit.

Montgomery had been given temporary command of the northern flank of Allied forces, but was hesitant to attack aggressively. “Monty is a tired little fart,” Gen. George S. Patton seethed in his diary. “War requires the taking of risks and he won’t take them.” Yet despite his marginal participation in the battle, and the overwhelming American sacrifices that actually had been made, the field marshal still made his grandstanding press conference appearance.

Wearing a double-badge maroon beret and a parachute harness—“dressed like a clown,” as one journalist described him at the time—Montgomery grandly declared before the gathered reporters, “As soon as I saw what was happening [on the first day of the battle], I took certain steps myself to ensure that if the Germans got to the Meuse they would certainly not get over the river . . . I was thinking ahead . . . [The Bulge was] possibly one of the most interesting and tricky battles I have ever handled . . . You must have a well-balanced, tidy show when you are mixed up in a dog fight . . . you can’t win the big victory without a tidy show.”

The field marshal also implied that it was the British who saved the Americans from an impossible situation, though, as a sop, Montgomery gave a patronizing pat on the head to the Americans soldiers who had, in reality, done most of the fighting. Then came the message that “nearly destroyed Allied unity,” as historian Stephen Ambrose wrote: “Montgomery said the GIs made great fighting men, when given the proper leadership.”

“Even after sixty years, it remains astonishing that a highly intelligent man who had reached the summit of command could be capable of such vainglorious folly,” wrote historian Max Hastings. “From Eisenhower downwards, every American who read Montgomery’s words reacted with disgust.”

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Indeed, long simmering tensions among the Allied High Command—largely caused by Montgomery’s incessant hectoring about his own position in the hierarchy—now seemed ready to explode. “This incident caused me more distress and worry than did any similar one of the war,” wrote Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Winston Churchill was left with the task of restoring some semblance of Allied harmony. Using all his oratorical skills in a speech before the House of Commons 11 days after Montgomery’s grandiose debacle, the British prime minister made it clear who the real heroes of the Bulge really were:

“I have seen it suggested that the terrific battle which has been proceeding . . . is an Anglo-American battle. In fact, however, the United States troops have done almost all the fighting and have suffered almost all the losses . . . The Americans have engaged thirty or forty for every one we have engaged, and they have lost sixty to eighty men for every one of ours.”

Churchill then continued, with what seemed to be a message aimed directly at the credit-hogging Montgomery: “Care must be taken in telling our proud tale not to claim for the British Army an undue share of what is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war, and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever famous American victory.”

JANUARY 8, 1992

And Now, the Ceremonial Tossing of the Cookies: Bush’s Public Pukefest

The State Dinner held at the Japanese prime minister’s home was a delectable array of cold salmon with caviar, a clear soup
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with mushrooms, medallions of beef with pepper sauce, and passion fruit ice cream. Unfortunately, most of the meal landed down President George H. W. Bush’s front as he vomited at the table after becoming suddenly and violently ill from the flu. The rest ended up on the lap of his host, who cradled the stricken president’s head as he proceeded to pass out. What was worse, while most people have the luxury of hurling in the privacy of their own homes, President Bush’s projectile vomiting was captured on camera and endlessly replayed on television. Late-night talk show hosts feasted on the mortifying moment, while a new word for throwing up entered the Japanese lexicon: Bushu-suru, which literally means “to do the Bush thing.” But it was the president himself who defused the awkward diplomatic incident with grace and humor. “Why don’t you roll me under the table,” he reportedly said to the prime minister as he lay on the floor, “and I’ll sleep it off while you finish the dinner.”

JANUARY 9, 1980

Off/On With Their Heads:

Saudi Slice and Splice

It was a busy day for beheadings in Saudi Arabia when, on the morning of January 9, 1980, 63 fanatical terrorists were publicly decapitated for having seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca the previous November. And just to ensure the entire kingdom got the government’s message of retaliation for such sacrilege, the executions were carried out simultaneously in eight Saudi cities. Alas, the hectic day wasn’t over once all the ornamented swords had sliced through their targets: 63 severed heads now had to be sewn back on for burial, as was the customary and decent thing to do. The year, again: 1980.
JANUARY 10, 2000

You’ve Got Fail:
The Doomed Merger of AOL and Time Warner

It was the largest corporate merger in history, reported in the business press as breathlessly as a dazzling royal wedding. On January 10, 2000, came the announcement that AOL, the nation’s dominant Internet provider, was to unite with communications giant Time Warner to form a seemingly perfect consolidation of old and emerging media. The future, it appeared, had arrived in an instant.

“Shortly before 9:00 last night, I had the honor and privilege of signing a piece of paper that irrevocably cast a vote taken, a vote of my 100 million shares, for this merger,” gushed Ted Turner, a Time Warner director. “I did it with as much or more excitement and enthusiasm as I did on that night when I first made love some 42 years ago.”

What followed, however, can only be likened to the regret of a hungover couple waking up to face one another in the harshest light of morning. “Dumbest idea I had ever heard in my life,” Don Logan, then head of Time Inc., later said to The New York Times. Logan hadn’t been told of the merger until the last minute. Neither had Timothy A. Boggs, then head of government relations at Time Warner, who received the news with “real regret and dread,” as he later told the Times. “I was very leery about this deal.”

As became increasingly clear, AOL wasn’t half the Romeo it appeared to be. Certainly its stock price was soaring, but there were some real hiddenwarts—not the least of which was The Washington Post’s discovery that the company had been inflating its advertising revenue. Subsequent investigations by the Securities
and Exchange Commission and the Justice Department resulted in hefty fines. Plus, the merger (which was in reality a takeover by AOL) coincided with the bursting of the tech bubble and the increasing obsolescence of AOL’s dial-up Internet service. And, as *Times* reporter Tim Arango wrote in 2010, “The companies had another problem: Both sides seemed to hate one another.”

During what Arango described as “the trail of despair in subsequent years,” corporate values plummeted, many employees lost their jobs or the bulk of their retirement funds, and feuding executives were shuffled in and out. Divorce was inevitable. And, like most bad marriages, the end came amid bitterest recriminations.

“I’d like to forget it,” Ted Turner told the *Times*. As the combined company’s largest stockholder, Turner lost the most from the relationship he had once likened to his first time making love—80 percent of his net worth, or about eight billion dollars. “The Time Warner–AOL merger should pass into history like the Vietnam War and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars,” he said. “It is one of the biggest disasters that have occurred to our country.”

**JANUARY 11, 1877**

**Wire Fraud: Boy, Did This Guy Ever Have a Bridge to Sell**

The Brooklyn Bridge, or the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” as the engineering marvel of its day was once called, still stands today as an enduring monument to 19th-century aspiration and ingenuity—no thanks to one grossly corrupt character with a pivotal role in its construction.

On January 11, 1877, the bridge’s board of trustees awarded one J. Lloyd Haigh the contract to provide the critical steel wiring that would actually support the mile-plus span. Chief engineer
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Washington Roebling had repeatedly warned the board that Haigh couldn’t be trusted, but his bid had been championed by board member and future New York City mayor Abram S. Hewitt, of whom Roebling wrote, “His success will prove a source of endless trouble and vexation.” As it turned out, Hewitt just happened to hold the mortgage on Haigh’s steel mill, and as a result of the lucrative cable wire contract, he would be assured of steady monthly payments.

Haigh was now in a position to perpetuate a massive fraud, one that could have fatally undermined the impressive span—the longest ever attempted, by far—in an era when far less ambitious suspension bridges routinely failed. And Roebling, previously debilitated by decompression sickness (or “the bends”) while working under the East River on the bridge’s foundations, wasn’t there to stop him.

“The deception, once discovered, was painfully simple,” historian David McCullough wrote. Haigh had a certain amount of high-quality steel wiring on hand, which he presented for inspection at his mill. But before the approved wiring made it to the nearby construction site, it was diverted on the way to a building and there replaced with inferior wire that was then applied to the bridge. Meanwhile the previously approved roll was secretly returned to the mill and the whole nefarious process began anew.

Fortunately, the design specifications for the bridge called for far more cable support than was necessary to support the span, so Haigh’s inferior steel didn’t have to be replaced—a nearly impossible undertaking anyway. “Yet the thought that such corruption was literally woven into the bridge could never be forgotten,” wrote McCullough, “and least of all by Roebling himself.”
On January 12, 1915, Representative James Thomas “Cotton Tom” Heflin, the proudly bigoted Klansman from Alabama,* rose to add his voice to the sexist spectacle unfolding in the United States House of Representatives. At issue was a constitutional amendment that would give women the right to vote—an appalling prospect for the majority of the all-male lawmakers. “Most women now control one vote,” the famously flamboyant Heflin addressed his colleagues, playing to the packed visitor galleries as well. “As I told a blushing suffragette the other day, if you are given the franchise you’ll control two votes in every household—and that’s too many.”

Many of the congressmen were perfect gentlemen during the course of the debate, declaring themselves to be interested only in protecting women from the evils of enfranchisement and in sustaining their divinely ordained place—at home. Very chivalrous, at least for the 13th century, but as the *New Republic* noted later that month, the speakers “never for a moment descended to sordid facts as to the actual place of millions of American women in industry. Such facts would disturb their oratory.” Furthermore, the editorial continued, “with all this regard for sainted mothers, loyal wives, and womanhood honored at large, such men as Mr. Bowdle seem incapable of sustaining ten minutes’ talk without revealing the satyr’s hoof.”

The congressman referred to by the magazine was Stanley E. Bowdle, the outgoing representative from Ohio, who, among

* See March 27 for an example of Heflin’s enlightened approach to race relations.
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much cheering from his fellows (and nary an objection from the southern “gentlemen” present), offered his rather salacious take on the whole voting issue: “The women of this smart capital are beautiful. Their beauty is disturbing to business; their feet are beautiful; their ankles are beautiful, but here I must pause—for they are not interested in the State.”

And Bowdle had much more to say, so much so that his allotted time was graciously extended. “Men and women are different,” he noted. “They are different in every atom. Right here is where women set up a grouch. Many women resent the limitations of sex. But why quarrel with God when He has the final word? I might as well weep because I cannot gestate a child.”

The voting measure failed passage that day, 204-174.

JANUARY 13, 1920

Yes, It Was Rocket Science

“We know that the nature of genius is to provide idiots with ideas twenty years later,” the French poet and novelist Louis Aragon once wrote. He had a point. It has often been that some of the most brilliant minds have gone unheralded in their own lifetimes. Van Gogh was a failed, starving artist who sold only a couple of paintings before committing suicide in 1890. People liked Bach’s organ playing but largely ignored his compositions. Edgar Allan Poe barely made a living writing his classic tales of the macabre.

And sometimes genius has actually been scorned. This was perhaps most egregiously evident in the ridicule Robert H. Goddard endured when his pioneering ideas and practical applications for space travel became public in 1920. The New York Times was particularly harsh. In an editorial titled “A Severe Strain on Credulity,” published on January 13, 1920, the newspaper declared
that Goddard “only seems to lack the [basic scientific] knowledge ladled out daily in high schools.” Stung by the unwarranted criticism, Goddard responded several days later. “Every vision is a joke until the first man accomplishes it,” he said to a reporter; “once realized, it becomes commonplace.”

Just 24 years after Goddard’s death in 1945, man first walked on the moon—propelled there by the rocket technology originated by the much derided physicist. The day after that historic event, the Times saw fit to publish a correction of its scathing editorial written nearly a half century earlier: “Further investigation and experimentation have confirmed the findings of Isaac Newton in the 17th century and it is now definitely established that a rocket can function in a vacuum as well as in an atmosphere. The Times regrets the error.”

JANUARY 14, 1963

Off to the Racists: George Wallace’s Terrible Turnaround

“It is very appropriate that from this cradle of the Confederacy, this very heart of the great Anglo-Saxon Southland, that today we sound the drum for freedom as have our generations of forebears before us time and again down through history. Let us rise to the call for freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

—Inaugural speech delivered by Alabama governor George Wallace, January 14, 1963
Well before he became the very embodiment of the fierce racial segregationist, George Wallace was a much more moderate man. “If I didn’t have what it took to treat a man fair, regardless of his color, then I don’t have what it takes to be the governor of your great state,” he declared during the Alabama gubernatorial campaign of 1958. But then Wallace decisively lost that race to his bile-spewing, Klan-backed opponent John Patterson. It was a bitter experience for the ambitious politician who had vowed at age 14 that he would one day head the state.

Out of the wreckage of his 1958 campaign—during which he had actually been backed by the NAACP—Wallace reinvented himself as a fire-breathing segregationist. “You know,” he said at the time, “I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career, and nobody listened. And then I began talking about niggers, and they stomped the floor.”

Having “made a Faustian bargain,” as his biographer, Emory University professor Dan Carter, described the tawdry transformation in the Huntsville Times, and “sold his soul to the devil on race,” Wallace won his long-coveted place in the governor’s mansion. And on January 14, 1963, he delivered the inauguration speech that would forever define him.

JANUARY 15, 1919

The Sweet Smell of Distress:
A Tidal Wave of Molasses

Death came suddenly on January 15, 1919, in a terrible surge of sweet, sticky goo. Residents and workers in Boston’s North End bustled about their regular routines on this unseasonably warm day when, at about 12:30 p.m., a loud rumbling, like an
The aftermath of the two-million-gallon molasses swell over Boston’s North End

overhead train, could be heard, accompanied by what sounded like the *rat-a-tat* of machine-gun fire—the popping of rivets, as it turned out. The noise came from a massive storage tank that had loomed over the neighborhood for three years and contained more than two million gallons of raw molasses. It was breaking apart.

The tank’s collapse sent a massive wave of molasses—about 8 to 15 feet high, and significantly heavier than seawater—hurtling through the surrounding streets at 35 miles an hour, destroying everything in its path. Railroad cars were lifted from their tracks; buildings were knocked off their foundations and crushed. People in the path of the relentless brown swell never stood a chance. All told, 21 people perished—some not uncovered from the viscous mass for days—and another 150 were injured.

“The sight that greeted the first of the rescuers on the scene is almost indescribable in words,” a *Boston Post* reporter wrote.
“Molasses, waist deep, covered the street and swirled and bubbled about the wreckage. Here and there struggled a form—whether it was animal or human being was impossible to tell. Only an upheaval, a thrashing about in the sticky mass, showed where any life was . . . Horses died like so many flies on sticky fly paper. The more they struggled, the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings—men and women—suffered likewise.”

The owner of the tank, United States Industrial Alcohol, tried to disclaim responsibility for the disaster, blaming it instead on an anarchist’s bomb. But after years of investigation, the company was found to have been negligent in both the construction and maintenance of the tank and forced to pay a hefty settlement to the survivors. And though the site of the disaster has long since been transformed into a park, some people swear that on a warm day the sweet smell of molasses still wafts through the air.

JANUARY 16, 1547

Tsar Struck: They Didn’t Call Ivan “the Terrible” for Nothing

Before Ivan IV became “the Terrible”—when he was ruling as the relatively powerless Grand Prince of Moscow while still a child—only the animals suffered: dogs and cats hurled from high towers by the gleeful little monster-in-the-making. But things started to get nasty when, on January 16, 1547, Ivan was crowned at age 16 as the first “Tsar of All the Russias.” Soon enough, the new sovereign transformed his realm into one vast chamber of horrors.
Entire cities suffered from the tsar’s increasingly unbalanced fury—most notably Novgorod in 1570. The dangerously paranoid Ivan, convinced that the people of Novgorod planned to betray him to the king of Poland, ordered the city to be sacked with horrifying thoroughness. Thousands of men, women, and children from all levels of society—from the elite down to the lowliest peasants—were systematically massacred, while the food supplies of those who managed to escape the butchery were destroyed. Little was left of Novgorod after Ivan’s six-week assault, which just happened to coincide with the 23rd anniversary of his coronation. The festivities continued in Moscow that summer when hundreds of the tsar’s enemies were skinned, boiled, burned, or broken in an orgy of retribution on Red Square.*

JANUARY 17, 1912

Sitting on the Bottom of the World:
Scott’s South Pole Debacle

It was one of the greatest feats in the history of exploration: an arduous trek to the very bottom of the world. Unfortunately, as Robert Falcon Scott discovered to his horror upon reaching the South Pole on January 17, 1912, he and his British team weren’t the first to make it there.

* In one more lowlight of his barbaric reign, Ivan killed his oldest son in a fit of fury. Apparently the ill-fated heir objected to his father kicking his pregnant wife and was beaned on the head with an iron staff for his effrontery. Three years later, in 1584, Ivan the Terrible was himself dead, but certainly not forgotten. In fact, the equally ferocious Stalin honored him over three centuries later as his favorite tsar.
“The worst has happened, or nearly the worst,” Scott recorded in his journal after spotting some of the first, uncertain signs that another team had already arrived. Soon enough, the evidence became unmistakable. “We marched on,” Scott continued, and “found that it was a black flag tied to a sledge bearer; near by the remains of a camp; sledge tracks and ski tracks going and coming and the clear trace of dogs’ paws—many dogs. This told us the whole story. The Norwegians [led by Roald Amundsen] have forestalled us and are first at the Pole.”

Nature seemed to mock the British adventurers’ failure that bitter January day, as a fierce gale set in and already freezing temperatures plummeted. “Great God! This is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority,” Scott lamented in his journal.

With their dreams of glory in ruins, and no flag to plant at the Pole, the frostbitten explorers had nothing to do now but turn around. “It will be a wearisome return,” Scott wrote. In fact, it proved deadly. One by one, each member of the five-man expedition succumbed to cold, disease, and exhaustion. Before he died, though, Scott managed to jot a final “Message to the Public”:

“I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of providence, determined still to do our best to the last . . . Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale.”
Copy and Pissed: Karma for the Light-Fingered Historian

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin was in quite a snit when, in 1993, she publicly accused author Joe McGinniss of lifting passages directly from her best-selling 1987 book, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*, for his own biography of Senator Edward Kennedy. “He just uses it flat out, without saying that it came from my work,” Goodwin complained to *The Boston Globe*. “You expect that another writer would acknowledge that,” she continued. “It’s inexplicable why it wasn’t done.”

But, as it turned out, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* wasn’t entirely Goodwin’s work to begin with. In fact, she liberally used the words of other authors in numerous instances. One glaring example was Goodwin’s appropriation of Rose Kennedy’s own prose, reproduced nearly word for word.

On January 18, 2002, 15 years after *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* was first published, *The Weekly Standard* exposed Goodwin’s overt plagiarism—not only of Rose Kennedy and several others, but perhaps most egregiously of author Lynne McTaggart’s 1983 biography of Kathleen Kennedy. The magazine included a damning list of comparative passages, and an explanation, of sorts, from Goodwin:

“I wrote everything in longhand in those days, including the notes I took on secondary sources. When I wrote the passages in question, I did not have the McTaggart book in front of me. Drawing on my notes, I did not realize that in some cases they constituted a close paraphrase of the original work.”

Goodwin also acknowledged that she later made an agreement with McTaggart to include more footnotes and a paragraph crediting her book for the subsequent paperback addition, though without quotes added to the purloined passages. What she neglected
to mention, however, was that a financial settlement had also been reached with McTaggart. That was revealed several days later in a *Boston Globe* article in which Goodwin insisted she was “absolutely not” a plagiarist and lamely defended her mistakes by explaining that *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* was the “first big work of history I have ever done.” But, as the newspaper helpfully pointed out, she had actually published *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* in 1976—11 years before.

Goodwin seemed to make more of a mess of her reputation as she struggled to redeem it. Her euphemistic description of her acts of plagiarism as “borrowing,” as well as her continued excuse of faulty note-taking, only inflamed her critics further. When she tried to salvage the credibility of her Pulitzer Prize–winning *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* by repeatedly asserting that it was uncontaminated by plagiarism, the *Los Angeles Times*, among other publications, revealed several instances of “borrowing” in that book. Then there was her promise to have the remaining offending copies of *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* pulped, which remained unfulfilled.

Bo Crader, who originally broke the story for *The Weekly Standard*, summarized the situation to devastating effect when he used Goodwin’s own indictment of Joe McGinniss to conclude his piece: “There’s nothing wrong with an author building on material from a previous book,” Goodwin had said. “That’s the way history is built, as long as you credit the source . . . I just don’t understand why that wasn’t done.”

**JANUARY 19, 1990**

**The Mayor Crack’d:**

**D.C.’s Smoking Top Gun**

Marion S. Barry, the mayor of Washington, D.C., was soaring high, buzzing on his own sense of invincibility, even
January

as his city was consumed by a murderous crack cocaine epidemic and rumors of his own chemical indulgences ran rampant. “Co-caaaane?” the self-proclaimed “Night Owl,” frequenter of sleazy strip joints and hotel rooms turned drug dens, exclaimed in a *Los Angeles Times* profile. “How folks use that stuff, anyhow? You put it up your noooose? No! Oooooooeeeee!” Mayor Barry’s expressed distaste for the drug was delivered, as the *Times* reporter noted, “mockingly, coy, flaunting it all,” while later in the piece he professed to be insulted by the charges aimed at him: “I’m not stupid enough to have done the things they accuse me of! God gave me a good brain. What I have done nobody knows about because I don’t get caught.”

And yet, less than two weeks after the *Times* profile ran, the news broke that Barry had been caught, on film, smoking crack cocaine at a downtown D.C. hotel in the company of his mistress, Hazel Diane “Rasheeda” Moore. The Night Owl was outraged at Moore’s apparent cooperation in what turned out to be an FBI sting operation. “I’ll be goddam,” he muttered over and over as he was arrested. “Bitch set me up.” He was arraigned the next day, on January 19, 1990—exactly one year after the mayor swore before a grand jury that he had never smoked crack with his associate Charles Lewis, who testified that indeed he had. A month later, Barry was indicted on three counts of perjury.

Such an epic disgrace would have been more than enough to ruin most politicians. But for the man dubbed “Mayor for Life” by the *Washington City Paper*, it was simply a bad blip. After Barry served his six-month sentence, his loyal constituents—quite a few of them on the city’s payroll—elected him to the city council and then, astonishingly, made him mayor again—twice!

“I’m gonna be like that lion the Romans had,” Barry told the *Times* before his ignominious (but temporary) fall. “They can just keep throwin’ stuff at me, you know? But I’ll be kickin’ their asses, every time! In the end, I be sittin’ there, lickin’ my paws!”
The essence of democracy requires ceding power, but few presidents have relished the prospect of abdicating control to their successors—especially when the incoming and outgoing chief executives really don’t like one another. John Adams set a precedent by slipping out of town before his rival Thomas Jefferson’s Inauguration. His son John Quincy Adams did the same thing after losing a most virulent election to Andrew Jackson. But few transitions were quite as contentious as when Dwight D. Eisenhower replaced Harry S. Truman on January 20, 1953. As presidential adviser Clark Clifford recalled, “The hatred between the two men that day was like a monsoon.”

The relationship between General Eisenhower and his former commander in chief had turned sour during the 1952 presidential campaign, in which the Republican Eisenhower faced off against Democrat Adlai Stevenson. “The general doesn’t know any more about politics than a pig knows about Sunday,” Truman once snorted, while Eisenhower attacked what he called “Truman’s mess in Washington.”

Truman was appalled by some of Eisenhower’s behavior, particularly his self-appointed peace mission to Korea, which the president dismissed at a press conference as “political demagoguery.” And when Eisenhower succumbed to Republican pressure to not defend his mentor Gen. George C. Marshall against scurrilous attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy, Truman was quick to condemn him. “[It was] one of the most shocking things in the history of this country,” the president said. “The trouble with Eisenhower . . . he’s just a coward . . . and he ought to be ashamed for what he did.”
The bitterness between the two men reached a peak on Inauguration Day, when they were forced to ride side by side to the Capitol. Eisenhower wondered aloud “if I can stand sitting next to that guy,” and then refused Truman’s offer to come inside the White House for coffee. Instead, he waited for the president outside in the car. “It was a shocking moment,” recalled CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid, who observed the incident, and a slight that Truman would never forget.

“I’m not one of Mr. Eisenhower’s admirers,” he later wrote. “I tried so hard to be pleasant and cooperative when I was turning the office over to Eisenhower, but he acted as if I was his enemy instead of the fellow who’d had the job just before him.”

Though Eisenhower and Truman differed in their accounts of the conversation that took place along the route to the Capitol, it was most certainly frosty. As White House usher J. B. West put it, “I was glad I wasn’t in that car.”

**January**

**JANUARY 21, 1535**

**Adventures in Unchristian Christianity, Part I:**

**Post No Notices…**

**Violators Will Be Incinerated**

There was a particular breed of heretic in Renaissance France for whom burning at the stake was deemed just too light a punishment by King Francis I. In a 16th-century version of viral messaging, a band of naughty Protestants anonymously posted notices all over Paris and beyond, mocking the doctrine that Christ is actually present in the Eucharist. One even made it into the
king’s own bedroom, which particularly incensed Francis, as did a second round of posters denouncing the pope and Catholic clergy as “a brood of vermin . . . apostates, wolves . . . liars, blasphemers, murderers of souls.”

A large reward was offered for the names of those who perpetuated the sacrilege that became known as the Affair of the Placards. Retaliation was swift and severe. On January 21, 1535, the bareheaded king, dressed in black and holding a lighted taper, made a solemn procession through the streets of Paris to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. He was accompanied by his sons, carrying the Eucharist under a canopy; all the other highest ranking nobles and ecclesiastics of France; and an array of sacred relics, like the head of St. Louis and what was believed to be the original crown of thorns. Then, after an expiatory Mass, while the king dined, six of the accused heretics were executed in front of the cathedral—“by a method judged fit to appease the Deity,” as historian Will Durant put it.

The condemned were suspended over a roaring fire, like chestnuts, and then repeatedly dipped into the flames to prolong their suffering. And Francis didn’t stop there. There were so many subsequent burnings that even the staunchly anti-Reformation pope, Paul III, finally had to order the “Most Christian King”* to cool it.

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* The traditional title of France’s monarchs, conferred by the papacy.
was calling to congratulate Conan O’Brien on his announced succession as host of NBC’s *The Tonight Show*, the same position Carson famously held for three decades. “For O’Brien,” that call in 2004 “was a bit like being blessed into the priesthood by the Pope himself,” wrote *New York Times* television reporter Bill Carter, who recounted the conversation in his book *Desperate Networks*. But the inheritance of one of television’s most venerable programs, a long-held dream for O’Brien, would have to be deferred for five years until the scheduled retirement of then host Jay Leno. The younger man joked to Carson about the delayed takeover: “If I live to see it,” to which the retired host replied, “Yes, it does seem like a long engagement before the marriage.” The divorce would happen so much quicker.

On Monday, June 1, 2009, *The Tonight Show With Conan O’Brien* finally made its debut with a brand-new stage set, comedian Will Ferrell as the first guest, and, most important, impressive ratings. O’Brien’s dream had at last been fulfilled. But the next day, Tuesday, the ratings slipped, and they continued to slide until at one point in its first month the program reached its smallest audience in the more-than-half-century history of *Tonight*, according to *The New York Times*. Then came another disaster. Instead of retiring, previous host Jay Leno began a prime-time variety show on NBC that September. It was a massive flop, dragging down the ratings of all the programs that followed it on the network—including O’Brien’s.

To rectify the problems it had created, NBC executives made what was widely regarded as a colossally stupid decision: Leno would be brought back to late night for a modified version of his variety show beginning at 11:35 p.m., and *The Tonight Show* would be pushed back to 12:05 a.m. O’Brien, who hadn’t been told of the plan in advance, balked. “I believe that delaying *The Tonight Show* into the next day to accommodate another comedy program will seriously damage what I consider to be the greatest franchise in the history of broadcasting,” he said
in a statement. “The Tonight Show at 12:05 simply isn’t The Tonight Show.”

On January 22, 2010—less than eight months after his debut—O’Brien hosted his last Tonight Show. Will Ferrell was among his final guests and, in an ironic twist, the ratings soared. As for that fancy new set, Jack McBrayer made an appearance in character as NBC page Kenneth Parcell (from the show 30 Rock) and noted to an improvised tour group that “NBC spent more time building this studio than using it.”

JANUARY 23, 1968

Saluting North Korea—
With One Finger

On January 23, 1968, North Korea captured the U.S.S. Pueblo, a small, rickety surveillance vessel on its first intelligence-gathering mission. One crew member, Duane Hodges, was killed in the assault, and 82 others, some grievously wounded, were taken prisoner. To be sure, it was a humilitating Cold War catastrophe for the United States, already deeply mired in the Vietnam War. But it was a propaganda debacle for the diminutive North Korean leader Kim Il Sung as well—thanks to the subversive efforts of the Pueblo’s captured crew, who used the only weapons they had to undermine the so-called Great Leader: their agile minds and their middle fingers.

Flexing his mini-muscles, Kim Il Sung made a spectacle of his American prisoners, trotting them out before the cameras and coercing confessions of their evil intent toward the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Given the savage beatings and other forms of torture the malnourished, ailing crew members had endured throughout their 11-month ordeal, there was
little they could do to defy their captors—at least directly—but their subtle resistance ultimately made a mockery of Kim’s oppressive tactics.

Subversive messages were embedded into the forced confessions. In one, for example, the men assured the North Koreans that they wished to “paean” (a word that by definition means to offer praise but that happens to sound a lot like “pee-on”) not just their country, but their leader as well. In another, the Pueblo’s commander, Lloyd M. Bucher, wrote in tiny Morse code “This is a lie.” But what really inspired the men was the discovery that their subjugators had no clue what the raised middle finger meant. “We now had a weapon!” wrote crew member Stu Russell. “Back in our rooms we were elated; this was one more thing we could use to discredit the propaganda we were being forced to grind out.” From then on, the men incorporated the single-digit salute into all the forced photos of themselves that North Korea sent out to impress the rest of the world with its might.

*January*

*U.S.S. Pueblo crew members raise a subtle “salute” to their North Korean captors.*
JANUARY 24, A.D. 41

Kiss *This*, Caligula: The Falsetto Assassin Strikes Back

While the Roman emperor Caligula may have been one of the most depraved rulers in history—a self-proclaimed god who slept with his own sisters and gleefully reveled in the blood-letting of friend and foe alike—it wasn’t his cruelest excesses that ultimately did in the half-mad monster. Rather, it was his incessant teasing of a particularly sensitive Praetorian Guard.

By most ancient accounts Cassius Chaerea was a strong and brave soldier, but he was saddled with an unfortunate impairment: an effeminate, high-pitched voice that some attributed to a war wound he sustained in the genital region. Caligula rarely missed an opportunity to mock his guard, assigning him such humiliating watchwords as “Venus,” which was slang for a castrated man, or “Priapus,” for the minor Roman god often depicted with an enormous erection. And, as the ancient chronicler Suetonius reported, whenever the emperor had Chaerea kiss his ring, he would “hold out his hand... forming and moving it in an obscene fashion.”

Fed up with the emperor’s constant taunts, Chaerea plotted his assassination, attracting other disaffected Romans in the process. And on January 24, A.D. 41, the deed was done, with “Priapus” delivering the first thrust of the knife.
In Norway, the Rocket’s Red Scare

A bad day averted can still be a bad day—like those times when the world is just a blink away from nuclear annihilation, just as it was on January 25, 1995. Early that morning, a joint U.S.-Norwegian scientific team launched a four-stage rocket from an island off Norway’s northwestern coast to study the aurora borealis. Only problem was, the Russians never got the memo alerting them to the launch, and the rocket’s appearance in the sky deeply unnerved them. The rocket bore a resemblance to U.S. Trident missiles and came from a region the Russians had long considered among the most threatening to their defenses. What resulted was “the single most dangerous moment of the nuclear missile age,” as Peter Pry, a former CIA official, described it in his book War Scare. On red-hot alert, President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian high command—their fingers poised over the button that could lead to Armageddon—had only minutes to decide whether to strike back with the 4,700 strategic warheads at their disposal. Fortunately for the fate of mankind, the rocket fell into the sea and the button remained unpushed.

Bedeviled by a Blue Dress

One of life’s certainties is that politicians lie, but perhaps none more brazenly than Bill Clinton did on January 26, 1998, when he vehemently denied having an affair with a certain White House intern. “I want to say one thing to the American people,”
the president declared, red-faced and finger pointing with indignation. “I want you to listen to me. I’m going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.” However, Miss Lewinsky had evidence of her dalliances with the chief executive embedded in a blue dress she had worn during one such encounter, and seven months later, in the face of this evidence, Clinton was forced to tell a different story: “I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate,” he admitted on August 27. “In fact, it was wrong.”

JANUARY 27, 1595

Oh, Brother!
Why You Wouldn’t Want to Be the Sultan’s Sibling

“Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne.”
—Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*

Sultan Mehmed II, “the Conqueror,” devised a simple solution in the mid-15th century for the fierce sibling quarrels that had long plagued the succession to the Ottoman throne: fratricide. “And to whomsoever of my sons the Sultanate shall pass, it is fitting that for the order of the world he shall kill his brothers,” Mehmed II decreed (after having his own infant brother strangled). Nearly a century and a half later, the murderous policy had a particularly devastating effect on Mehmed III’s brothers—all 19 of them!—when he came to the throne on January 27, 1595. The young men, some of them still babies, were ritually strangled with a bowstring and then buried with all due solemnity in the same tomb as their recently deceased father.
By 1393, Charles VI of France was already showing worrisome signs of the psychosis that would eventually rob him of all reason. His physician suggested that ways be found to divert and amuse the increasingly unbalanced monarch, and so a masquerade in which he participated was held on the evening of January 28 to celebrate the fourth marriage of one of Queen Isabeau’s ladies-in-waiting. As it turned out, though, the event known as the Ball of the Burning Men very well may have been the spark that sent Charles right over the edge.

Traditionally a widow’s remarriage was an occasion for mockery and foolishness, characterized by “all sorts of license, disguises, disorders, and loud blaring of discordant music and clanging of cymbals,” as historian Barbara Tuchman explained in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. This particular masquerade took on a distinctly pagan flavor, with five high-ranking knights, along with the king, dressed as wildmen from the woods. Their costumes, sewn onto the men, were made of linen soaked with resin to which flax was attached so that, as Tuchman wrote, “they appeared shaggy and hairy from head to foot.” The men also wore masks of the same material. It was all fun and festive, but, alas, highly flammable.

As the disguised knights and the king
ran about mimicking savages by howling like wolves and screaming obscenities, the king’s younger brother, Louis, Duke of Orléans, arrived late and drunk. He was also carrying a torch, which had been strictly forbidden for the other guests. According to one account, the duke went up to one of the dancers, and in an effort to determine his identity, held the torch up to his face. He got too close, though, and the knight’s resin-soaked costume instantly erupted into flames, which quickly spread to the men dancing near him. The contemporary chronicler known as the Monk of St. Denis graphically described what followed: “Four men were burned alive, their flaming genitals dropping to the floor . . . releasing a stream of blood.” Only one knight managed to survive the Ball of the Burning Men—by hurling himself into a vat of wine.

King Charles was fortunate enough to be standing away from his fellow dancers, and he was protected from the sudden inferno by the voluminous skirt of his aunt, which she cast over him. Still, the French sovereign was never the same again. Madness eventually enveloped him and rendered him unfit to rule. The poor king was unable to recognize his own wife and spent his remaining years walking around, very gingerly, convinced that he was made entirely of glass.

JANUARY 29, 904

Papal Bully

It was bad news for deposed pontiffs Leo V and his rival Christopher (now considered an “antipope” by the Catholic Church) when Sergius III obtained the papal throne on January 29, 904. Both men, now in prison, were immediately strangled to clear the title. Another former pope fared rather poorly under Sergius, too. According to an account by the 15th-century Italian writer Bartolomeo Platina, the corpse of the long dead Pope
January

Formosus—having already been once exhumed and put on trial in a grisly spectacle known as the Cadaver Synod—was dug up again, beheaded, and thrown into the Tiber “as unworthy the honor of human burial.”*

JANUARY 30, 1649 and 1661

Dead and Deader: An Execution and an Exhibition

On this cold January day in 1649, King Charles I stepped from the Banqueting House of Whitehall Palace and onto a scaffold erected just outside. Behind the king, in the room he’d just departed, was the brilliant fresco celebrating the glories of his Stuart dynasty; before him was the block upon which he was to have his head chopped off—the first and only British monarch to suffer such a fate, having been defeated in a long civil war with Parliament and subsequently convicted of treason. A massive crowd had gathered to witness the unprecedented spectacle but could not hear the king as he spoke his final words. “I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown where no disturbance can be,” Charles told the Bishop of London before laying his head on the block. Then, with a single blow of the ax, the executioner completed the bloody deed.

Exactly 12 years later, the late king’s nemesis and the architect of his demise, Oliver Cromwell (no direct relation to the other

* Some historians dispute Platina’s account. What remains certain, though, is that Sergius, who participated in the original Cadaver Synod as a bishop, honored the mad pope (Stephen VI) who had convened it by adding an epitaph to his tomb, lauding Stephen’s actions against “the haughty intruder Formosus.”
Bad Days in History

decapitated Cromwell—see January 6) also faced public execution. But he bore no expression on the occasion and seemed oblivious to the entire proceeding—perhaps because he had already been dead for nearly three years.

Even though he had abolished the monarchy, and despite his own Puritan sensibilities, Cromwell lived like a king while serving as Lord Protector. He occupied the royal palaces and, when he died in 1658, was buried among Britain’s deceased monarchs in Westminster Abbey. But he would not rest in peace. After the monarchy was restored under Charles II in 1660, Cromwell’s corpse was exhumed from the abbey and, on the anniversary of Charles I’s execution, dragged to Tyburn, where common criminals met their end. The body was hanged, and then the head was lopped off, spiked on a pole, and put on gruesome display atop Westminster Hall, where it remained for the next two decades as a grim warning to all who would ever dare threaten a king again.*

JANUARY 31, 1999

Feet Odor: The Stinkiest Sneaker Commercial in History

On January 31, 1999, the giant shoe retailer Just For Feet tripped and fell flat on its face—right in front of an estimated 127 million television viewers. The Birmingham, Alabama–based company, which in recent years had expanded into a retail behemoth with superstores across the United States, was anxious to

* A severe storm reportedly blew the grisly relic off the roof of Westminster Hall, and after changing hands over several centuries, the head reputed to be Cromwell’s was buried in 1960 at Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge.
January

update its image. And what better way than to run a spectacular commercial during the Super Bowl, when viewers were known to scrutinize product ads for their entertainment value almost as closely as they watched the game. The cost was exorbitant, but the exposure priceless. Just For Feet took the plunge.

“What we were looking to do was to start to build our brand,” CEO Harold Ruttenberg told Salon.com in a May 1999 article. “What we wanted was for people to see this and say, ‘Boy, that was terrific. Now we’re customers of yours. We want to shop with you.’” Rather than coming off as edgy and relevant, though, the spot that ran during the fourth quarter made Just For Feet seem stunningly racist instead.

The ad opened with a shot of what appeared to be four white men (the race and sex of some of them was later disputed) in a military Humvee—“just for feet” on the license plate—tracking the footprints of a barefoot black runner in Kenya as a lion looked on. Catching up with the man, the pursuers offered him water, apparently laced with some kind of tranquilizer. Upon drinking it, the runner immediately collapsed to the ground, after which the men forced a pair of Nikes on his feet. Then, when the helpless man recovered his senses, he saw the shoes on his feet and began to shout, “Noooooo!” The spot closed with him still trying to shake the shoes from his feet as he ran away.

The backlash from the ad was immediate and fierce. “Appallingly insensitive,” declared Stuart Elliott in The New York Times. Writing in Advertising Age magazine, Bob Garfield called the commercial “neo-colonialist . . . culturally imperialist, and probably racist. Have these people lost their minds?” The Des Moines Register suggested Just For Feet be renamed “Just For Racists,” and in an editorial said that “the ad agency who signed off on the commercial should be required to come up with a campaign that shows the worst about their own cultures.”

Obviously this was far from the kind of response Just For Feet desired in its first foray into big-league advertising. Accordingly, it
sued the advertising firm of Saatchi and Saatchi, which had created the commercial. “As a direct consequence of Saatchi’s appallingly unacceptable and shockingly unprofessional performance,” the complaint read, “Just For Feet’s favorable reputation has come under attack, its reputation has suffered, and it has been subjected to the entirely unfounded and unintended public perception that it is a racist or racially insensitive company.”

Advertising executive Grant Richards, for one, had little sympathy for either side of the dispute. “The agency was a fool for proposing such a thing, and the client was a fool for paying for it,” he told Advertising Age in 2000. In the end, Just For Feet’s complaint became irrelevant; the company went bankrupt in 1999 and collapsed in the midst of a massive accounting fraud.
February

“Why, what’s the matter, 
That you have such a February face, 
So full of frost, of storm and cloudiness?”
—William Shakespeare, 
Much Ado About Nothing

FEBRUARY 1, 2004

Keeping a Breast
in the News

On a day that saw two suicide bombings in previously calm Kurdistan, hundreds of pilgrims crushed to death at the Muslim holy site of Mecca, and continuing genocide in Darfur, media attention in the United States and elsewhere around the world was focused on something else entirely: the brief exposure of Janet Jackson’s nipple during a halftime performance at Super Bowl XXXVIII. So riveting was the event, in fact, that it broke all records for Internet searches and inspired the advent of YouTube. Terror and mass starvation, it seems, just couldn’t compete.
Bad Days in History

FEBRUARY 2, 1685

Doctored to Death

Britain’s King Charles II was renowned for his vigor—both in the bedroom, where he sired scads of royal bastards by a number of different mistresses, and in his overall health. But on the night of February 1, 1685, the so-called Merry Monarch went to bed feeling a little less than his hearty self. Then, after a restless sleep, Charles awoke the next morning “looking pale as ashes and ghastly,” according to his groom, as well as “unable or unwilling to say a single word . . . his face pale as death . . . speechless.” And so began an excruciating, five-day ordeal for the king, provided courtesy of the realm’s finest physicians.

After the king fell unconscious, a doctor opened his veins with a penknife and drained 16 ounces of his blood. After the king showed no improvement, many more medical experts were on the scene. “The majority pronounced him apoplectic,” wrote Lord Macauley, “and tortured him during some hours like an Indian at a stake.” A frenzy of “remedies” were prescribed—nearly 60 in all, including such potions as Oriental bezoar stone from the stomach of a goat and spirits of human skull. Some of the treatments were so toxic that they burned poor Charles’s lips and tongue and caused scalding urination. The king’s head was shaved and hot irons applied to draw out the bad humors from his brain, while other parts of his body were similarly blistered using heated cups.
Various emetics were forced down his throat. And, of course, there was more bleeding—the ultimate 17th-century cure-all.

Yet despite “every kind of treatment attempted by Physicians of the greatest loyalty and skill,” as the subsequent doctor’s report read, Charles continued to ail. On February 6, he finally expired, but not before issuing a wry apology, “for being such a time a-dying.”

**FEBRUARY 3, 1959**

**Bad News on the Doorstep**

Waylon Jennings was lucky enough to have given up his seat on the chartered plane and lived to become a legend of outlaw country music. Bandmate Tommy Allsup also avoided the flight, having fortuitously lost a coin toss with Ritchie Valens. And Dion DiMucci, of Dion and the Belmonts fame, simply decided the plane ticket was too expensive. Alas, there was only so much good fortune to go around that day, and it ran out on rock-and-roll pioneers Buddy Holly and J. P. “the Big Bopper” Richardson, as well as Valens, when their plane crashed into an Iowa cornfield on February 3, 1959—“The Day the Music Died,” as Don McLean so memorably put it in his 1971 song “American Pie.”

**FEBRUARY 4, 1998**

**Somebody Must Not Have Liked Windows 98**

As if their personal safety isn’t enough of a worry for public figures, there’s always the lurking danger of assaults on
their dignity. Take Elizabeth II, for example. First the queen was pelted with eggs—one of which dripped down her dress—during a 1986 tour of New Zealand. Then, in Australia, a construction worker dropped his trousers and mooned the monarch as her motorcade passed. Poor Tom Cruise was splashed in the face with a squirt gun while answering a question on the red carpet, and President George W. Bush was subjected to the ultimate Arab insult when an Iraqi reporter lobbed a pair of shoes at him during a press conference, shouting, “This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog.” (The president successfully dodged each missile.)

Even one of the world’s richest men, Bill Gates, was forced to eat humble pie—literally—when on February 4, 1998, a creamy confection was plastered on his face while he was in Belgium for
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a business conference. But at least Gates wasn’t alone in enduring such a humiliating assault. Fellow billionaire Rupert Murdoch has also been pied, as have San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, beauty queen turned anti-gay crusader Anita Bryant, conservative commentator William F. Buckley, King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, clothing designer Calvin Klein (with a pie actually intended for fellow designer Karl Lagerfeld), U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, consumer advocate and perennial presidential candidate Ralph Nader, and movie star Sylvester Stallone—to name just a few.

FEBRUARY 5, 1969

Not Ready for Prime Time—or Any Time

On Wednesday, February 5, 1969, ABC premiered Turn-On, a sketch show one of its producers described as a “visual, comedic, sensory assault involving animation, videotape, stop-action film, electronic distortion, computer graphics—even people.” Mostly, though, it was a garbled program of sophomoric sex jokes no one thought were funny. In fact, WEWS-TV, the ABC affiliate in Cleveland, was so unamused that it yanked Turn-On from the air at the first commercial break and sent the network management an angry telegram: “If your naughty little boys have to write dirty words on the walls, please don’t use our walls. Turn-On is turned off, as far as WEWS is concerned.” The affiliate revolt continued. Denver’s KBTV didn’t even bother to air the episode. KATU in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle’s KOMO-TV made the same decision. Within the week, ABC took the affiliates’ cue and canceled Turn-On after a single, only partially seen episode.
FEBRUARY 6, 1637

Dim Bulbs: The Foolish Frenzy of the Dutch Tulip Bubble

One of the most spectacular market collapses in history was caused not by frenzied real estate speculation or dangerous derivatives trading, but by the simple tulip. The flower had found great favor in the Netherlands after being introduced from Turkey in the late 16th century. Bulbs became quite pricey as the demand for the limited supply of the slow-growing cultivar increased; tulips became even more desired after a botanical virus caused vividly colorful streaks to run through the petals of certain varieties. In the mania that ensued, it seemed everyone wanted to have at least one precious bulb as the ultimate status symbol. As speculators entered the picture, prices soared even higher—absurdly high, with people selling their land and homes to enter the tulip market. Then, on February 6, 1637, the tulip bubble burst. Apparently no one showed up that day to bid on bulbs at the market in the town of Haarlem, perhaps kept away by an outbreak of the plague. Panic ensued, and, as the tulip’s popularity faded, fortunes were lost in an instant. Now, nearly four centuries later, one of the Netherlands’ most famous exports can be purchased in bulk—for next to nothing.

FEBRUARY 7, 1497

Roasted Masterpieces Florentine: The Bonfire of the Vanities

On February 7, 1497, all the fun to be had in Florence went up in flames in a spectacle known as the Bonfire of the Vanities.
In an effort to rid the city-state of its sinful preoccupation with luxury, beauty, and entertainment, the fanatical Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola—who effectively ruled the republic after the Medici were temporarily driven out—coerced Florentines to submit their most precious objects to a massive pyre erected at the Piazza della Signoria. Heaped onto the multitiered structure were valuable paintings (including, by some reports, works by Botticelli), statuary, books by Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, furniture, tapestries, cosmetics, sumptuous clothing, musical instruments, gaming tables, playing cards, and thousands of other things that added a little zest to life. As the monk's followers danced ecstatically around the colossal pile, everything burned. It was ironic, then, that a little over a year later, after being excommunicated by the pope and condemned as a heretic, Savonarola himself was consigned to the flames at the very same public square—a site that soon enough would be under the watchful eye of Michelangelo's very nude (and, as the monk no doubt would have viewed it, very lewd) statue of David.

FEBRUARY 8, 1587

Random Ax of Incompetence: The Queen’s Botched Beheading

Death tends to be a drag, but for Mary Queen of Scots, it was a debacle as well. After fleeing her own rebellious kingdom in 1568, Mary became a prisoner of her cousin Elizabeth I of England for nearly two decades. Then, after being charged in a conspiracy to kill the English queen and replace her on the throne, she was condemned to death.

On February 8, 1587, the doomed monarch was led into the Great Hall of Fotheringhay Castle, where a scaffold had been
erected for the occasion and the headsman awaited. The gathered witnesses stood grimly as Mary prepared herself and then laid her head on the block. With that, the executioner took a mighty swing with the ax. He missed. The blow struck the back of her head instead of the neck. Witnesses reported the stunned queen muttering “Sweet Jesus!” before a second strike all but severed her head. The headsman, exasperated by his own incompetence, was forced to saw away the remaining sinew to finally finish the job.

Alas, the ordeal wasn’t over. After an execution, it was common practice to hold the head aloft to the witnesses. But when the headsman raised the queen’s, it escaped his grasp and plopped on the floor. Mary had been wearing a wig, which was all that was left in the hapless executioner’s hand.

As a final indignity, the corpse of the Scottish queen lay moldering in a sealed coffin for months at the castle before finally being given a decent burial.*

FEBRUARY 9, 1973

Good Thing It Was Built by an Insurance Company: The Skyscraper That Didn’t Like the Sky

The sky was falling—or at least it seemed to be. Giant 500-pound panels of mirrored glass came crashing down from Boston’s John Hancock Tower on February 9, 1973. It was just

*Mary was initially buried at Peterborough Cathedral, but her son, King James I, moved her body to Westminster Abbey—her elaborate tomb located just opposite from that of her nemesis, Queen Elizabeth I.
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the latest in a long cascade of collapsing panes, which ultimately left more than an acre of the gleaming building pockmarked with black-painted plywood. But the timing that day was particularly unfortunate, coinciding as it did with the building company’s denial that the entire glass facade would have to be replaced. That would ultimately become necessary, a result of an epic engineering failure. But, as Robert Campbell reported in *The Boston Globe*, falling windows were actually the least of the now iconic structure’s myriad problems.

It all began in the basement, even before the new, rhomboid-shaped skyscraper started to rise from the ground. Three sides of the steel-braced excavation caved in, with a nasty ripple effect on surrounding buildings, especially the 19th-century architectural treasure Trinity Church, which suffered severe damage. “We’ll never get it back the way it was,” church treasurer Robert Kennard told the *Globe* in 1973. “If they put the Hancock Tower on a helicopter and dropped it into the Atlantic Ocean, most of the parishioners would be happy.”*

From there, it only got worse. The completed structure made its occupants seasick. “The tower, in ordinary wind conditions, was accelerating too fast for comfort,” Campbell wrote. “It was doing a sort of cobra’s dance, swaying a few inches forward and back and, at the same time, twisting.” And while that problem was eventually fixed, it

* The church was ultimately awarded over $4 million in damages.
Bad Days in History

came after the most daunting prospect of all: The Hancock Tower, its owners were informed in 1975, was in danger of actually tipping over. The unusual length of the structure (almost 300 feet) made it vulnerable, with just the slightest shift in plumb slowly building upon itself until eventually gravity took its course and collapsed the tower on its narrow edge. Fortunately, there was just enough room found in the building’s service core to install 1,500 tons of reinforcing steel braces.

But oddly, as the Globe reported, absolutely none of the tower’s structural deficiencies had anything to do with the most visible sign of distress; the crashing windows. The giant windows fell off, it emerged, only because the reflective chrome applied between the double panes wasn’t flexible enough to withstand high winds. The windows have all since been replaced, and the once derided “plywood palace” once again mirrors the sky—intact.

FEBRUARY 10, 1971

I Really Want to Sue You . . .

George Harrison’s “Unconscious Plagiarism”

He was known as the Quiet Beatle, but after the breakup of that legendary band in 1970, George Harrison emerged with a mighty blast of songs—a triple album’s worth—that showcased his own musical brilliance. Rolling Stone magazine’s Ben Gerson deemed Harrison’s solo effort, All Things Must Pass, “[an] extravaganza of piety and sacrifice and joy, whose sheer magnitude and ambition may dub it the War and Peace of rock and roll.” Music lovers embraced the album, which shot to number one on music charts across the world. But Harrison would have less than four
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months to enjoy his multi-platinum success before a lawsuit soured the whole experience.

The first single released from the album was “My Sweet Lord,” a catchy spiritual anthem that turned out to be just a tad too catchy, and too derivative of another bouncy tune, “He’s So Fine,” by the Chiffons—or so a copyright infringement suit filed on February 10, 1971, claimed.

“I wasn’t consciously aware of the similarity between ‘He’s So Fine’ and ‘My Sweet Lord’ when I wrote the song as it was more improvised and not so fixed,” Harrison later recalled in his autobiography, *I Me Mine*, “although when my version of the song came out and started to get a lot of airplay people started talking about it and it was then I thought, ‘Why didn’t I realize?’ It would have been very easy to change a note here or there, and not affect the feeling of the record.”

After the failure of several rounds of settlement negotiations with Bright Tunes Music Corp., owner of the rights to “He’s So Fine,” the case finally went to trial in 1976. Harrison, guitar in hand, testified as to how “My Sweet Lord” was inspired and written, while music experts parsed every note. The judge concluded that it was “perfectly obvious the two songs are virtually identical.” He did concede, however, that the former Beatle had probably not lifted the Chiffons’ song deliberately, but rather was guilty of “subconscious” plagiarism.

The protracted ordeal, including the monstrous expense to defend himself, had a profound effect on Harrison. “It made me so paranoid about writing,” he later said. “And I thought, ‘God, I don’t even want to touch the guitar or the piano, in case I’m touching somebody’s note.’ Somebody might own that note, so you’d better watch out!”

In the end Harrison, who died of cancer in 2001, was at peace with all that had happened. “I don’t feel guilty or bad about it,” he said in his autobiography; “in fact [“My Sweet Lord”] saved many a heroin addict’s life. I know the motive behind writing the song in the first place and its effect far exceeded the legal hassle.”
Either Way, You End Up
With Lots of Gas

A massive natural gas explosion in Greene County, Pennsylvania, literally rocked the earth and caused an intense, five-day inferno. No worries, though. Oil giant Chevron, owner of the fracking well that caused it, found a way to make it right with those neighbors immediately impacted by the blast: Free pizza! One hundred gift certificates—“Special Combo Only”—were mailed with a nice note from Chevron—a gesture, blogger Will Bunch of the Philadelphia Daily News noted, that might as well have read: “The Chevron Guarantee: Our well won’t explode . . . or your pizza is free.”

Putting the “S’more” in
“Smorgasbord” (and “Morgue,” Too)

King Adolf Frederick had the misfortune of ruling Sweden during a period when the monarchy was virtually powerless, so he had a lot of free time on his hands. As a mere figurehead, there was really nothing much for the king to do but decorate snuff boxes (his favorite hobby) and eat. One meal in 1771 proved particularly memorable, as it was Adolf Frederick’s last: lobster, caviar, sauerkraut, and kippers, all washed down with champagne. But it was undoubtedly dessert—14 servings of the extremely rich sweet roll known as semla—that caused the king’s fatal stroke soon after he finished the feast.
Although he is now considered one of the greatest American portrait painters, no one paid much attention to Thomas Eakins the artist in 1886. They were too consumed by Eakins the unconventional art instructor—the one who dared expose the nude to his students, both male and female, in a rigidly repressed era when even the exposed ankle of a woman was considered scandalous.

“Where the tendency of the age was to cover up, Eakins’ was to strip bare, to get down to the natural and essential,” wrote his biographer, Lloyd Goodrich. Eakins himself once wrote, “I see no impropriety in looking at the most beautiful of Nature’s works, the naked figure.” And that’s just what got him stripped of his position as director of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Eakins had long courted trouble with his introduction of nudity into the academy—including his own on at least one occasion—but never more so than in early 1886, when he removed the loincloth of a male model to demonstrate to a class of women the exact motion of the pelvis.

Hauled before the academy’s board of directors and grilled relentlessly about his teaching methods—“the thing was a nightmare,” he later said—Eakins was forced to resign on February 13, 1886. And no amount of protest from the majority of students devoted to their instructor would alter the decision. “We will not ask Mr. Eakins to come back,” one of the directors announced to the press. “The whole matter is settled, and that is all there is about it.”

The loss of his prestigious position was a devastating blow, particularly since he had yet to impress anyone as an artist. “No one collected Eakins but Eakins,” a critic later remarked. And though he would return to the classroom—including at a breakaway institution formed by students disaffected by his dismissal from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts—he was continuously
scorned, both as an artist and a man, even by members of his own family, some of whom actively conspired against him.

In 1895, Eakins was dismissed from Drexel Institute, again for his unconventional use of the nude, and within a few years he withdrew from teaching altogether. Sadly, there would be no recognition of his brilliance before he died in 1916; that would have to wait until decades later. “My honors are misunderstanding, persecution & neglect,” the artist wrote of himself, “enhanced because unsought.”

FEBRUARY 14, 1779

Captain Cooked:
A Grisly End in Hawaii

Captain James Cook, widely acclaimed as the greatest sea explorer of all time, once wrote that his ambition led him “not only farther than any man has been before me, but as far as possible for a man to go.” Heady words indeed, but certainly true for the time. During his three famed expeditions of the 1770s, Cook and his team of adventurers sailed vast, uncharted distances—from the tropical delights of previously unknown Pacific islands to the forbidding frozen seas of both the Arctic and the Antarctic—recording, mapping, and generally reshaping what Europeans knew of the world. But it was in his quest to find the elusive Northwest Passage that Captain Cook’s voyages of discovery came to an abrupt and brutal halt in Hawaii.

The local population welcomed the members of Cook’s expedition when they found safe harbor at Kealakekua Bay, along the coast of Hawaii’s Big Island. In fact, the natives’ treatment of Cook “seemed to approach to Adoration,” reported James King, a second lieutenant aboard the ship Resolution. What King and the others didn’t know was that their arrival coincided almost
perfectly with an annual religious observation, during which the
god Lono—associated with peace and plenitude—gained a brief
period of ascendancy over the warlike deity Ku. Thus, Captain
Cook was regarded as the physical incarnation of Lono, and that
explained what King observed as “the very Abject & slavish man-
ner, in which the commonality shewd their respect.”

After several months spent basking in the Hawaiians’ hospitality,
Cook departed to continue the expedition north—just as Lono’s
time of rule was traditionally eclipsed by Ku. The British ships
had not sailed very far, however, when one of the masts broke.
There was no choice but to return to Kealakekua Bay for repairs.
Unfortunately, the Hawaiian people saw Cook/Lono’s unexpected
return as a threat to Ku, embodied by a native monarch named
Kalani‘opu‘u. The balance of power had now shifted to a danger-
ous degree.

The previously welcoming Hawaiians now turned hostile. They
threw rocks at the interlopers, exposed their backsides, and brazenly
stole from them. “Ever since our arrival here upon this our second
visit we have observ’d in the Natives a stronger propensity to theft,”
noted Cook’s second-in-command Charles Clerke, as “every day
produc’d more numerous and more audacious depredations.”

The British attempted to retaliate with firepower, but the lengthy
time needed to reload limited their efficacy. Then, on February
14, 1779, hostilities reached a climax when locals seized Captain
Cook and four marines accompanying him, repeatedly clubbed
them, and held them under water, after which their corpses were
dragged away to the interior. The bodies were then subjected to
a ghastly postmortem ordeal, albeit one that was supposed to
honor them as warriors: being cooked and stripped of flesh, with
the pieces distributed among the various local chiefs. After much
negotiation, what was left of Cook was returned to his men. King
left this account:

“He [the chief] gave us a bundle wrapped very decently, & cov-
ered with a spotted cloak of black and white feathers, which we
understood to be a mourning colour. On opening it we found the Captain’s hands, which were well known from a remarkable cut, the scalp, the skull, wanting thigh bones and arm bones. The hands only had flesh on them, & were cut in holes, & salt crammed in; the leg bones, lower jaw, & feet which were all that remained & had escaped the fire.”

**FEBRUARY 15, 1942**

**Slung in Singapore:**

**Britain’s WWII Humiliation**

“The worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history.”

—Prime Minister Winston Churchill, recalling Britain’s unconditional surrender of its colonial power base in Singapore—the supposedly impregnable “Gibraltar of the East”—to the rampaging forces of Japan on February 15, 1942

It was yet another devastating Allied setback in the earliest days of World War II (see December 7 and December 8), and a staggering blow to British prestige in the region.

**FEBRUARY 16, 1899**

**Finis! But What a Way to Go . . .**

French president Félix Faure was having a perfectly delightful day dallying with his mistress, Marguerite Steinheil, when at the climactic moment the French euphemistically call *la petite*
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mort (the little death) something bad happened. Faure suffered a massive stroke, which caused that little death he no doubt enjoyed so much to grow into one significantly less appealing.

FEBRUARY 17, 1673

Molière: The Last Role of a Lifetime

Perhaps life has never mimicked art with quite as much irony as it did on the evening of February 17, 1673, when the famed French actor and playwright Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (better known by his stage name Molière) gave his final performance—ever—playing the role of the hypochondriac Argan in his own farce, *Le Malade Imaginaire (The Imaginary Invalid)*. While acting out Argan’s chimerical ailments, Molière succumbed to a very real coughing fit and collapsed on stage. Trouper that he was, the actor managed to complete the performance. But then, just hours later, he died of hemorrhage from a burst blood vessel.

FEBRUARY 18, 2001

The Spy Who Mugged Me

Bonnie Hanssen was about to drive into an abyss of betrayal so dark and dreadful as to render her almost speechless. Worried that her husband had not yet returned for dinner after dropping his friend off at the airport on the evening of February 18, 2001, she went to see if he might still be there. Instead, she found a swarm of FBI agents who immediately took her into custody and
informed her that her husband—one of their own—had just been arrested for espionage. As it emerged, Robert Hanssen wasn’t just any ordinary spy, either. Rather, the FBI counterintelligence agent was one of the worst traitors the United States had ever known: a modern-day Benedict Arnold whose treachery in selling vital secrets to the Soviet Union stretched back years, grievously compromised his country, and, inevitably, caused suspicion to fall on his own wife. Yet, for all that, another hideous revelation awaited Bonnie Hanssen: a personal betrayal of the most mortifying and invasive sort.

The friend Robert Hanssen had dropped off at the airport that fateful February afternoon—the best man at their wedding, godfather to one of their six children, and frequent guest in their home—had, unbeknownst to her, been spying on Bonnie while she was having sex with her husband, watching via a hidden camera Robert had set up himself. The churchgoing spy liked to have his friend watch—and always had, ever since 1970, when he began sending nude pictures of Bonnie to his pal then serving in Vietnam. He wrote about it, too, posting graphic tales of voyeurism on the Internet, including one about Bonnie and his friend that he titled “The ‘Unwitting?’ Porn Star.”

“She reacted with shock and horror,” wrote David Wise in his book Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI’s Robert Hanssen Betrayed America. “Her remark was buzzing around in the family, and for good reason. What Bonnie had told her sister . . . was brief and unforgettable: ‘My husband is a traitor and a pervert.’”
The song is instantly recognizable: “Sky rockets in flight . . . afternoon delight”—the performers, on the other hand, not so much. Perhaps that can be chalked up to the Best New Artist Grammy awarded to the Starland Vocal Band on February 19, 1977—“the kiss of death,” as band member Taffy Danoff once described it in an interview with VH1. “I feel sorry for everyone who’s gotten it since.” Hers was a sentiment no doubt shared by many of the other Best New Artist designees whose once promising careers all but evaporated in the wake of their Grammy glory—especially those “one-hit wonders” who received the award in the years immediately following the Starland Vocal Band. What ever happened to Debby Boone (1978)? Or A Taste of Honey (1979)?

With some very notable exceptions, like the Beatles (1965) or Mariah Carey (1991), the Best New Artist award has often proved to be a one-way ticket to obscurity: “The Curse of Christopher Cross,” as The Washington Post called it—a reference to the 1981 recipient who, the newspaper noted, “released more than a dozen albums after his win, yet his own parents probably could not pick him out of a lineup.”

Perhaps there is no better evidence of a Best New Artist jinx than the fate of 1990 winners Milli Vanilli, who were stripped of

* As for the Starland Vocal Band, its four subsequent albums flopped, after which the group (and the marriages of the quartet’s two couples) disintegrated.
their Grammy when it was revealed that they hadn’t actually sung one note on their multi-platinum album *Girl You Know It’s True*. Fortunately for the other Best New Artist nominees that year, the Grammy committee decided not to bestow the award on the runner-up—“perhaps figuring,” as the *Post* noted, “everyone had suffered enough.”

**FEBRUARY 20, 1939**

**George Washington Hitler?**

George Washington would have seethed with disgust had he still been alive for the birthday party held in his honor on February 20, 1939, at Madison Square Garden. Sure, there was a great turnout—about 20,000 people—and spirits were high. But the organizers of the evening, the German American Bund, seemed much more intent on honoring Adolf Hitler than the actual birthday...
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boy. Under a giant banner of the nation’s first president, flanked by Nazi swastikas, a succession of speakers spewed enough anti-Semitic venom to make the event in the heart of New York City worthy of a Nuremberg rally.

With the audience whipped into a full frenzy, Fritz Kuhn, president of the Bund and host of the night’s activities, at last made his appearance. To howls of appreciation, he made repeated references to President Franklin D. Roosevelt as “Frank D. Rosenfeld” and his New Deal as the “Jew Deal.” Mercifully, it was Kuhn’s last moment in the spotlight. Soon after the rally, he was arrested on a variety of criminal charges—including embezzlement from the very same Madison Square Garden event his group had sponsored—and eventually deported back to Germany.*

FEBRUARY 21, 1848

The Communist Manifesto:
An Idea That Should Have Remained One

Plato presented his idea of the ideal society in *The Republic*. Thomas More did the same thing in *Utopia*, as did Voltaire in *Candide*. These were mere philosophical musings, interesting but entirely impractical. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels followed in

* If Kuhn expected a hero’s homecoming, he was sadly disappointed. The Nazis considered him an embarrassment—“stupid, noisy and absurd,” as Hans Dieckhoff, Germany’s ambassador to the United States, described him. He died on December 14, 1951, in Munich—“a poor and obscure chemist,” The New York Times reported, “unheralded and unsung.”
the same vein, but when their *Communist Manifesto* was first published on February 21, 1848, people actually tried to apply—or rather *impose*—this half-baked blueprint for a worker’s paradise. Thus, what really should have been left as an academic exercise on political theory instead became the most malignant force of the 20th century.

The lethal tract empowered monsters like Mao and Stalin, metastasized in totalitarian regimes across the globe, and ultimately caused the deaths of an estimated 100 million people through murder and mass starvation. And though the misery continues in North Korea and elsewhere, the socialist system so earnestly advocated by Marx and Engels in 1848 eventually crumbled under the weight of its essential infeasibility.

“Let’s not talk about communism,” Russian president Boris Yeltsin declared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. “Communism was just an idea, just pie in the sky.”

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**Bad Days in History**

On February 22, 1983, Arthur Bicknell’s *Moose Murders: A Mystery Farce in Two Acts* opened on Broadway. Then it closed the very same night—a legendary bomb that *The New York Times* later described as “the standard of awfulness against which all Broadway flops are judged.” The critics were brilliantly savage in their reviews of what Frank Rich later called “the worst play I’ve ever seen on a Broadway stage”:

- “If your name is Arthur Bicknell, change it.” —Dennis Cunningham, WCBS
- “So indescribably bad that I do not intend to waste anyone’s time by describing it.” —Clive Barnes, *New York Post*
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• “I will not identify the cast pending notification of next of kin.” —Jay Sharbutt, Associated Press
• “A visit to ‘Moose Murders’ will separate the connoisseurs of Broadway disaster from mere dilettantes for many moons to come.” —Frank Rich, The New York Times
• “[It] would insult the intelligence of an audience consisting entirely of amoebas.” —Brendan Gill, The New Yorker
• “There are bad plays, terrible plays and plays like Moose Murders.” —Variety

Clive Barnes did at least commend actress Eve Arden for having the sense to leave the play before it opened. “Some people have all the luck,” he wrote. Holland Taylor, however, had the misfortune of replacing her. “There were things that I put my foot down about and changed,” she told The New York Times. “But there were things I couldn’t change. Like the play.”

“Was it really that bad?” asked the playwright, Bicknell, who recalled his friends and family, as well as the cast, slinking out of a party at Sardi’s restaurant on opening night. “The simple answer is yes.”

FEBRUARY 23, 1669

To Kiss (A Very Dead) Queen

As the daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother of kings, Queen Katherine of Valois might have expected to be treated with a little dignity after her death in 1437. Ah, but it was not to be. Katherine’s tomb in Westminster Abbey was destroyed during the reign of her grandson Henry VII to make way for his magnificent new chapel. And for centuries thereafter, the queen’s corpse—her bones “firmly united, and thinly cloth’d with flesh, like scrappings of tann’d leather”—lay exposed as a ghoulish tourist attraction.
“Katherine, Queen of England, lieth here,” John Weever wrote in 1631, “in a chest or coffin with a loose cover, to be seen and handled of any who will much desire it.”

Poor Katherine lay helpless as she was ogled by the masses and had bits of her desiccated skin snatched away by mischievous schoolboys. But the ultimate impiety came on February 23, 1669, when the famed diarist Samuel Pepys celebrated his 36th birthday by essentially molesting the dead queen.

“Here we did see, by particular favour, the body of Queen Katherine of Valois,” Pepys wrote of the occasion, “and I had the upper part of her body in my hands, and I did kiss her mouth, reflecting upon it that I did kiss a queen.”

It wasn’t until 1878—nearly four and a half centuries after her death—that Katherine of Valois was finally given a proper resting place in the abbey, next to her husband, King Henry V. But part of Katherine may still be seen. Her funeral effigy, minus hair and various body parts, is on display at the Abbey Museum.

FEBRUARY 24, 1868

Andrew Johnson:

Slurring With Disaster

Andrew Johnson downed three shots of whiskey right before he was sworn in as Abraham Lincoln’s second-term vice president. Thoroughly soused, with his face a vivid red, Johnson teetered to the podium in the Senate chamber to deliver what should have been the most triumphant speech of the onetime tailor’s political career. Instead, it was rambling, incoherent tirade about his “plebeian roots”—delivered “in the language of a clown,” as the London Times reported, “with wild gesticulations and shrieks,” by a man whose “behavior was that of an illiterate, vulgar, and drunken
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rowdy.” Senator Zachariah Chandler was among the horrified witnesses of the spectacle. “I was never so mortified in my life,” he wrote to his wife. “Had I been able to find a hole I would have dropped through it out of sight.”

Having delivered his own second Inaugural speech—widely considered to be one of the most impressive in history—Abraham Lincoln was forced to defend the behavior of his chosen vice president. “I have known Andy Johnson for many years,” he said. “He made a bad slip the other day, but you need not be scared; Andy ain’t a drunkard.” A month later, the president was dead, and the delicate task of reuniting the shredded Union fell to his bullheaded, self-important successor. That wicked hangover Andrew Johnson endured after his appalling Inauguration performance would come to symbolize the rest of his ill-fated presidency—culminating in his impeachment on February 24, 1868.

The new president, a southern Democrat, had one overriding aim, which was to bring the rebellious states back into the Union as swiftly and gently as possible. The plight of freed blacks, many of whom suffered brutal servitude only a notch above slavery, was of virtually no consequence to him. “Whatever Andrew Johnson may be, he certainly is no friend of our race,” Frederick Douglass had presciently remarked upon encountering Johnson at his vice presidential inauguration.

Virtually every bit of legislation benefiting the freedmen—from enfranchisement to full citizenship—the president vetoed. This earned him the deep enmity of congressional Republicans and led indirectly to his impeachment. “Andrew Johnson is the impersonation of the tyrannical Slave Power,” declared Senator Charles Sumner. “In him it lives again.”

The immediate cause of impeachment, however, was the president’s attempted dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a holdover from the Lincoln Administration and a staunch Republican ally, who Johnson feared would have too much power when
Congress put the South under military rule. The firing of the secretary (who actually refused to step down and instead barricaded himself in his office) was a direct violation of the Tenure of Office Act, which prohibited the president from removing any member of his Cabinet without Senate approval. Warned of the consequences of tangling with Stanton, the president remained obdurate. “Impeach and be damned,” he snorted. Congress responded accordingly.

“I am in favor of the official death of Andrew Johnson,” an Indiana congressman declared during the House debate on impeachment. “I am not surprised that one who began his presidential career in drunkenness should end it in crime.”

All manner of invective followed. One congressman described Johnson as a “despicable, besotted, traitorous man . . . this accidental president made so by the assassin’s bullet.” Another said, “He has dragged, as a demagogue, the robes of his high official position in the purlieus and filth of treason.” There was even a comparison made between the president and the demented Roman emperor Nero.
February

The venomous orations throughout the impeachment trial—what Johnson contemptuously called “the show” and declined to attend—prompted future president James A. Garfield to remark upon “the insane love of speaking among public men . . . We are wading knee deep in words, words, words . . . and are but little more than half across the turbid stream.”

In the end, though, words were not enough. Andrew Johnson survived in office, squeaking by with just one vote.

FEBRUARY 25, 1836

P. T. Barnum:
Dissecting the Truth

Joice Heth had already served P. T. Barnum quite well as the showman’s first sideshow attraction—posing for amazed audiences across the Northwest as the infant George Washington’s 161-year-old nursing “mammy.” So when the nearly blind, almost completely paralyzed old slave died on February 25, 1836, Barnum saw an opportunity to exploit further the woman he had touted as “The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World” by staging a public autopsy of her at New York’s City Saloon. Well over a thousand people, each paying 50 cents a ticket, gathered to watch the gory spectacle performed by surgeon David L. Rogers, who concluded that at a mere 80 years old, Heth had been a fraud. Barnum, however, was unfazed by the exposure of what the New York Sun called at the time “one of the most precious humbugs that ever was imposed upon a credulous community.” Indeed, he wallowed in the free publicity generated by the media frenzy surrounding the autopsy. He even fed it, suggesting to one unsuspecting editor that Heth was actually alive and well and living in Connecticut.
Bad Days in History


A Second Date of Infamy

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once declared December 7, 1941, “a date that will live in infamy.” February 26 holds no such distinction—in any year—but considering what a rotten day it was throughout history, perhaps it should be given some recognition. Consider:

- 1577: Eric XIV, the insane and deposed king of Sweden, ate his last meal in prison—a bowl of poisoned pea soup.
- 1616: Two days after the Roman Inquisition unanimously declared the Copernican discovery of a stationary sun orbited by Earth “foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture,” Pope Paul V ordered that Galileo be informed of the decision and instructed “to abstain completely from teaching or defending this doctrine and opinion or from discussing it.”
- 1815: Napoleon Bonaparte, the scourge of Europe and terror of kings, escaped from exile on the small Mediterranean island of Elba to wreak 100 more days of havoc—until his final defeat at Waterloo.
- 1860: On what is now known as Indian Island, near Eureka, California, approximately 100 members of the peaceful Wiyot tribe were slaughtered as they slept by white settlers of the region. The Northern Californian reported the massacre: “Blood stood in pools on all sides; the walls of the huts were stained and the grass colored red. Lying around were dead bodies of both sexes and all ages from the old man to the infant at the breast. Some had their heads split in twain by axes, others beaten into jelly with clubs, others pierced or cut to pieces with
bowie knives. Some struck down as they mired; others had almost reached the water when overtaken and butchered.”

• 1918: In one of the worst sports disasters of all time, more than 600 people were killed when stands collapsed and caught fire during a horse race at the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

• 1936: Japan faced the largest revolt in its modern history when a group of young radical army officers led some 1,400 troops under their command in an attack on the prime minister’s residence and other government and military buildings in Tokyo, killing Home Minister Saito Makoto, Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo, and Army Inspector General of Military Training Watanabe Jotaro.

• 1965: President Lyndon Johnson approved the introduction of American ground forces into Vietnam, disregarding the sharply worded warning of Ambassador Maxwell Taylor: “White-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is [is] not [a] suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles. French tried . . . and failed. I doubt that US forces could do much better.” Upon learning that two Marine battalions had been successfully deployed, the president gloated about the North Vietnamese leader—a bit prematurely, as it turned out—“Now I have Ho Chi Minh’s pecker in my pocket.”

• 1987: President Ronald Reagan received a withering rebuke in the final report of the Tower Commission, which was formed to investigate the so-called Iran-Contra scandal—a complicated scheme in which arms had been sold to Iran in exchange for American hostages held in Lebanon, with proceeds diverted to fund Nicaraguan rebels fighting against that nation’s leftist government. Rather than being seen as a maniacal schemer bent on undermining the law, Reagan was portrayed by the commission as something almost as bad: in essence, a doddering old coot who remained clueless as members of his administration ran amok, dealing with terrorists and illegally funding a foreign war.
Bad Days in History

- 1993: An al Qaeda–planted truck bomb was detonated in the parking garage of the North Tower of New York’s World Trade Center. Although the terrorist attack failed in its aim to bring down the building, and the South Tower with it, six people were killed and more than a thousand injured.
- 1995: Barings, Britain’s oldest bank, the place where Queen Elizabeth II kept her money, collapsed. Incredibly, the catastrophe was caused largely by a single rogue derivatives broker, Nick Leeson, whose fraudulent and unauthorized speculative trades led to losses totaling $1.3 billion.

February 27, 1859

Francis Scott Key’s Son Should Have Watched His Ram Parts

The nation’s capital has been witness to so many sex scandals that an entire calendar could be filled commemorating the most salacious highlights. But one Washington romp in particular emerged as perhaps the most luridly entertaining of them all—except, of course, for the key player, who ended up dead.

Philip Barton Key II, son of “The Star-Spangled Banner” author Francis Scott Key, had been conducting a torrid, most indiscreet affair with the young wife of his friend Representative Daniel Sickles, himself a bit of a scamp who once introduced his mistress, a brothel owner named Fanny White, to Queen Victoria at a Buckingham Palace reception. Although most of Washington buzzed about the flagrant encounters that occurred right in Sickles’s home on Lafayette Square, the cuckolded congressman hadn’t a clue. Then, one day, he received an anonymous letter detailing the whole sordid affair. “I do assure you,” the letter read, “[Key] has as much use of your wife as you have.”
February

The next day, February 27, 1859, an unsuspecting Key showed up outside the Sickles home, signaling his mistress that he was ready for action. This time, however, it was the enraged husband who ran out of the house, armed with two derringers. “Key, you scoundrel!” Sickles shouted as he chased his former friend through Lafayette Park in broad daylight. “You have dishonored my house—you must die!” With that he fired at Key, but the bullet merely grazed its mark. “Murder! Murder!” Key screamed. Several more shots hit Key in the groin and the chest as he continued to scream for mercy. Then he fell. “Is the scoundrel dead?” Sickles asked a witness to the murder. “He violated my bed!”

Meanwhile, a young page named Bonitz ran to the nearby White House to inform President James Buchanan what his old friend Sickles had just done. Buchanan responded by launching a cover-up by trying to silence Bonitz, who he believed was the only witness to the killing. The president warned the naive page of the ordeal he would face as a trial witness—including being locked up without bail during the proceedings—and urged the young man to flee back home to South Carolina to avoid such a calamity.

President Buchanan’s efforts on behalf of his friend proved unnecessary, because an unrepentant
Sickles immediately turned himself in. “Of course I intended to kill him,” the congressman told friends. “He deserved it.” The three-week trial that followed was a sensation, especially with the then novel defense of temporary insanity, concocted by the lawyers representing Sickles. The jury acquitted the killer after deliberating for little more than an hour.

The capital erupted in celebration at the news. But then the freed murderer did the unthinkable: He reconciled with his wife. All the goodwill he generated after the act of revenge suddenly evaporated. “If Mrs. Sickles was herself guilty before the death of Key she is guilty still, and if one can be forgiven now, Key ought to have been forgiven in February,” wrote the Washington correspondent for the Philadelphia Press, reflecting widespread public sentiment.

Sickles failed to gain reelection to Congress and was essentially drummed out of town. A part of him remains in the nation’s capital, however. The leg he lost during the Civil War is now on display at the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

FEBRUARY 28, 1927

The “Scientist’s” Ape Rape

Science took a grotesque step backward in 1927, when Ilya Ivanovich Ivanov, backed by the Soviet government, first attempted to create an entirely new creature from existing representatives of both ends of the human evolutionary spectrum: a hybrid of man and ape. After years of frustration in pursuit of his “humanzee,” Ivanov finally got his chance when the governor of French Guinea gave him free rein to conduct a monstrous breeding program at the botanical gardens near the capital of Conakry.

On February 28, the pseudoscientist and his son took two captured female chimpanzees, named Babette and Syvette, held them down with nets and squirted into them human sperm taken from
February

an unidentified local man. “The experiment was carried out by the two of them in a particularly brutal and hurried way,” wrote Russian scholar Kirill Rossiianov, “which made the description of it read like it was rape.”

Fortunately for the fate of mankind, neither chimp became pregnant—nor did a third chimp, Black, who was knocked out with chloroform and inseminated the following June. So Ivanov decided to switch tactics. He approached the governor with the idea of introducing chimpanzee sperm into hospitalized women, without their knowledge. As Ivanov recorded in his diary, it was a “bolt from the blue” when the governor said no, “a terrible blow.”

Discouraged, Ivanov returned to the Soviet Union and obtained permission to impregnate women there—provided they were willing and kept in isolation for a year. Incredibly, he found a volunteer. “With my private life in ruins, I don’t see any purpose in my further existence,” a woman, identified only as “G,” wrote to Ivanov. “But when I think that I could do a service for science, I feel enough courage to contact you. I beg you, don’t refuse me.”

Ivanov was stuck with only one potential mate for “G,” an orangutan named Tarzan. But when Tarzan died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage, the man-ape project died with him. After that, government officials reconsidered their support of Ivanov’s ghastly experiments; indeed, they slapped him into prison for alleged counterrevolutionary activities. Soon after his release in 1930, Ivanov died—mercifully without leaving a humanzee, or a hurangutan, as his legacy.
March

“March is the month that God designed to show those who don’t drink what a hangover is like.”
—GARRISON KEILLOR

MARCH 1, 1938

Superman’s Creators, Turned Into Chumps in a Single Bound

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created one of the world’s most iconic superheroes—Superman. Then they sold him for the paltry sum of $130, which they then had to split between themselves. And while the Man of Steel went on to earn billions for his new owners, Siegel and Shuster died nearly broke. It was either an act of corporate malfeasance worthy of Lex Luthor, to snatch away the rights to the man from planet Krypton, or the result of astonishing naïveté on the part of two young men desperate to introduce their creation to the world.

Superman had long languished in the imagination of Siegel, a lonely outcast from Cleveland, before he met Shuster, his equally alienated fellow dreamer whose vivid illustrations gave dimension
to that otherworldly paragon of strength and virtue (as well as his dorky alter ego, Clark Kent, and Lois Lane, who wanted one but not the other).

“When Joe and I first met, it was like the right chemicals coming together,” Siegel once recalled. Only problem was, no one else cared. For six years Superman was rejected by a succession of publishers until finally Vin Sullivan, editor of National Allied Publications (precursor of DC Comics), agreed to put him on the June 1938 cover of National’s *Action Comics* #1. Superman had at last taken flight, but without Siegel and Shuster along to enjoy the ride.

On March 1, 1938, just before their superhero hit the stands, the young men signed away all rights to their creation—with their names spelled wrong on the accompanying $130 check*—but agreed to give him continuous life as employees of the publisher for ten years. It was a colossal mistake—decision-making kryptonite, which would result in Siegel and Shuster spending decades of their lives wrangling in court to reclaim the rights to their signature character. Finally in the 1970s Warner Communications, the eventual owner of the Superman franchise, gave pensions of $20,000 per year, as well as health benefits, to each of the men, both of whom had fallen on hard economic times.

“There is no legal obligation,” Jay Emmett, then executive vice president of Warner, told *The New York Times*, “but I sure feel there is a moral obligation on our part.”

Joe Shuster died in 1992, and Jerry Siegel in 1996. Their heirs, however, continued the legal battle long after. Superman, meanwhile, kept well above the fray, continuing the very lucrative pursuit of truth, justice, and the American way.

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* The canceled check was purchased at a 2012 auction for $160,000. Meanwhile, copies of the first Superman comic are extremely rare and coveted by collectors, one of whom paid more than $2 million for the issue in 2011.
March

MARCH 2, 2001

Desecration Takes Effort:

The Taliban’s Buddha Butchers

Maya temples bulldozed for road fill in Belize . . . Ancient mummies violated by thieves in Egypt . . . Irreplaceable antiquities plundered in Iraq. The instances of cultural desecration in modern times seem to belie the very concept of civilized society—perhaps nowhere more egregiously than in Afghanistan, where, on March 2, 2001, the Taliban regime launched an assault on two of the world’s most splendid treasures, the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Carved into the mountainside surrounding what had once been a Buddhist pilgrimage site, the statues (one reaching nearly 175 feet high, and the other nearly 120 feet) stood over the region for at least 15 centuries. The Taliban destroyed them in a matter of weeks. “These idols have been gods of the infidels,” declared Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban’s supreme leader, who ordered their destruction. “The real God is Allah.”

After international pleas for the preservation of the colossal statues were ignored, the world looked on in horror as the attack began with antiaircraft guns and artillery. But the Buddhas still stood after the barrage. “This work of destruction is not as simple as people might think,” lamented Taliban information minister Qudratullah Jamal. “You can’t knock down the statues by shell ing as both are carved into a cliff; they are firmly attached to the mountain.” In the end, it took strategically placed explosives to complete the ruin. All that remained were the two empty niches that once sheltered the Buddhas. “Muslims should be proud of smashing idols,” Mullah Omar said at the time. “It has given praise to God that we have destroyed them.”

However, Koichiro Matsuura, director general of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), better
reflected universal sentiment when he called the destruction a “crime against culture. It is abominable to witness the cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, of the whole of humanity.”
March

MARCH 3, 2006

Governor Schwarzenegger’s Pro-Hispanic Policy:
They’re Hot

“She’s either Puerto Rican, or the same thing as Cuban, I mean they are all very hot. They have the, you know, part of the black blood in them and part of the Latino blood in them that together makes it.”

—Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, referring not to Mildred Patricia Baena, later revealed to be the mother of his love child, but to California assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia, in a quote later released from a tape of a closed-door meeting on March 3, 2006

MARCH 4, 1841

Deadly Dull:
The Fatal Inaugural Address

He was America’s first manufactured candidate: a Virginia aristocrat transformed by the Whig Party into a hard cider–swillin’, log cabin–livin’ everyman. Certainly William Henry Harrison had served ably as a general in the War of 1812, as well as against Tecumseh’s Indian Confederation, but there had been very little to distinguish him in the decades since. It was that very blandness, in fact, that made him the perfect choice for presidential contender—a blank canvas upon which the Whigs could create their own image. Thus, Harrison became a frontier legend and hero of the previously
obscure Battle of Tippecanoe. And all he had to do during the campaign against the incumbent, Martin Van Buren, was to avoid any controversial issues and keep his mouth shut.

Harrison complied so thoroughly with the gag order that the Democrats took to calling him “General Mum.” Alas, the epithet wouldn’t endure. Harrison and his running mate, John Tyler, (popularized together in the ditty “Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too”) defeated Van Buren handily, after which the torrent of words that must have been building in the silenced candidate burst forth in the longest, most excruciatingly boring Inaugural Address ever delivered.

The crowds gathered at the U.S. Capitol in the freezing cold of that early March day* must have gained some intimation of the torture that was to follow when Harrison began his address with this laboriously overwrought sentence:

“Called from a retirement which I had supposed was to continue for the residue of my life to fill the chief executive office of this great and free nation, I appear before you, fellow-citizens, to take the oath which the Constitution prescribes as a necessary qualification for the performance of its duties; and in obedience to a custom coeval with our Government and what I believe to be your expectations I proceed to present to you a summary of the principles which will govern me in the discharge of the duties which I shall be called upon to perform.”

For over two hours Harrison blathered on, his address peppered throughout with odd references to ancient Rome. But it could have been worse. The president-elect had allowed Daniel Webster to edit the speech, which at least shortened it a bit. Indeed Webster

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* Presidential Inaugurations were held on March 4 until the ratification of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution in 1933, which changed the beginning of a presidential term to January 20.
later boasted that he had killed “seventeen Roman proconsuls as dead as smelts, every one of them.”

As much of an ordeal the never ending address was to the audience, it proved fatal to Harrison. He had delivered it without a coat and developed a cold as a result. That turned to pneumonia, and within a month Harrison became the first U.S. president to die in office—quite literally bored to death.

MARCH 5, 1854

Monumental Prejudice:
A Bad Day With Black Rock

The magnificent stone obelisk that is the Washington Monument today was still just a stump in 1854. And thanks to the actions of a group of anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant political agitators called the American Party, or “Know-Nothings,” it remained that way for more than two decades.
The trouble began when Pope Pius IX donated a black marble stone for the memorial, one taken from the ruins of the Temple of Concord in the Roman Forum. Though many other states and organizations had also given inscribed slabs to the construction effort, the Know-Nothings saw the papal gift as a loathsome declaration of the Vatican’s intent to control the United States through the mass influx of Catholic immigrants.

Outraged by the Holy Father’s supposed insult, a band of Know-Nothing Party thugs appeared at the construction site during the late hours of March 5, 1854, overpowered the guard, and snatched away the Vatican stone. By some accounts they then chipped away souvenir shards and tossed the rest into the Potomac River. But whatever happened, the pope’s gift was never seen again. Not content with this brazen act of thievery, the Know-Nothings next seized control of the Washington National Monument Society through a rigged election and took over construction. They didn’t get very far, though—installing only a few layers of inferior marble (which later had to be replaced) before an appalled Congress stopped funding the project altogether.

More than a decade after construction was abandoned, Mark Twain described the unfinished monument as an “ungainly old chimney that . . . is of no earthly use to anybody else, and certainly is not in the least ornamental. It is just the general size and shape, and possesses about the dignity, of a sugar-mill chimney . . . It is an eyesore to the people. It ought to be either pulled down or built up and finished.”

It was not until 1877, with the Know-Nothings having long since dissipated, that work on the Washington Monument resumed. It was finally completed in 1884, and stands as the tallest freestanding stone structure in the world. Evidence of the Know-Nothings’ legacy is still clearly visible, however: The exterior of the obelisk is of two distinct shades of marble. The stone used in the first stage of construction was unavailable when the job was resumed so many years later.
March

MARCH 6, 1835

A Friendship Tested by Fire

The English philosopher John Stuart Mill faced an excruciating task on the evening of March 6, 1835. He had devastating news to deliver to a friend, an admission of personal fault so grievous that only the most magnanimous of men might—just might—be able to forgive it. Clutching the charred remnants of a burned manuscript—the only copy of the magisterial history of the French Revolution that Thomas Carlyle had entrusted to him—he arrived at the historian’s London home, looking, as Carlyle later wrote, “pale as Hector’s ghost.”

Trembling and in despair, Mill explained that the manuscript had accidentally been burned as kindling by a maid. Yet while the loss represented countless hours of agonizing labor for Carlyle, it was left to him to comfort his friend long into the night. “Mill, poor fellow, is terribly cut up,” Carlyle said to his wife after the shamed philosopher finally left. “We must endeavour to hide from him how very serious this business is for us.”

Sure enough, the next day Carlyle sent Mill a most gracious note. “You left me last night with a look which I shall not soon forget,” he wrote. “Is there anything that I could do or suffer or say to alleviate you? For I feel that your sorrow must be far sharper than mine. . . . Courage, my Friend!”

A note from Mill offering generous compensation for the lost labor crossed Carlyle’s. And though the historian gratefully accepted, there still remained the unimaginable task of rewriting. The author was convinced he couldn’t do it. “I remember and can still remember less of it than of anything I ever wrote with such toil,” he lamented. “It is gone.” And so were his notes, which he had already destroyed.

Nevertheless, he forged through; “surely the most leaden, discouraging, all but intolerable task I ever had to do,” as he related
to his brother. And, as inspiration eventually came “direct and flamingly from the heart,” Thomas Carlyle completed one of the greatest works in English literature. As might be expected, John Stuart Mill gave it a glowing review.

MARCH 7, 1997

Wiener-Take-All?
The Case of the Pilfered Penises

Maybe Heinrich Kramer wasn’t so crazy after all. In his authoritative guide to the world of witches, *Malleus maleficarum* (see December 5), the 15th-century inquisitor warned that evil-doers in league with Satan could make men’s private parts disappear. Then, five centuries later, an epidemic of “penis snatching” swept through a number of West African nations, where belief in magic was still very much alive. Fortunately, the people of the Ivory Coast were alerted to the danger by what (they heard) had been a rash of disappearing penises in Ghana, and they took appropriate action. On March 7, 1997, one sorcerer was burned to death in Koumassi, and another beaten to death in Port Bouet. Alas, the reprisals weren’t enough to stop the rumored spread of genital theft to nearby Benin. But at least the panicked locals there were armed with gasoline and machetes, along with magical elixirs, to address the threat. More thieving sorcerers were destroyed, and countless penises preserved as a result—at least until that summer, when the problem popped up again in Senegal.*

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*There is an actual psychological syndrome, called koro, in which men, in a contagious panic, believe their penises have shriveled up or disappeared.*

~98~
The Enemy Underfoot:
Done In by a Mole

William III was one historical figure for whom a molehill actually had far more significance than any mountain. Indeed, the English king died on this date from injuries sustained after his horse tripped on one. And for that, the unassuming rodent responsible for the lethal mound—“the little gentleman in velvet”—was toasted by William’s political enemies for being the agent of his demise.

We Lost 29 Years Ago—
Now Come Home and Get Your Color TV

The abject humiliation that struck most Japanese people on August 15, 1945—when the thin voice of their emperor, never before broadcast, enjoined them to “endure the unendurable and bear the unbearable” in the wake of agonizing defeat—didn’t hit Hiroo Onoda right away. In fact, the loyal soldier, unaware of Japan’s unconditional surrender in World War II, continued to wage guerrilla warfare in the Philippines for almost three decades before that horrible day of reckoning finally arrived for him on March 9, 1974, when his former commanding officer showed up to assure him that the war was really over. “Suddenly everything went black,” Onoda recalled in his book, No Surrender. “A storm
raged inside me. I felt like a fool for having been so tense and cautious on the way here [to meet the former commander] . . . Worse than that, what had I been doing for all these years?”

MARCH 10, 1962

Eddie Fisher Gets Some Karma From “Cleopatra”

The sizzling affair between Elizabeth Taylor and her future fifth (and sixth) husband, Richard Burton—launched on location in Rome during the filming of the bloated epic Cleopatra—was hot enough to fry the egg on fourth husband Eddie Fisher’s face. The fading heartthrob had discovered his wife’s infidelity when he made an unannounced visit to the movie set in the winter of 1962.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I had sent them an engraved announcement telling them the time I was coming,” Fisher recalled. “They couldn’t keep their eyes, not to mention their hands, off each other.”

It was a humiliating betrayal—not unlike the one Fisher’s former wife, Debbie Reynolds, felt when he left her for Taylor—but there was nothing the cuckolded crooner could do about it. The diamonds he bought Elizabeth for her birthday didn’t help, nor did the gun he held to her head. All that was left to do was maintain some semblance of dignity by keeping the torrid affair, which Burton gleefully rubbed in his face, a secret. Alas, Fisher failed in that respect, too.


Fisher denied the report that same day, but soon after leaving Rome for New York, he was promptly hospitalized after overdosing
on amphetamines. Upon his release, the singer made one last public effort to deny what Burton had taken to calling *Le Scandale.*

“The only romance between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton is Mark Antony and Cleopatra,” he told a gathering of reporters, “and I might say a mighty good one.” Then, as the press conference continued, Fisher took a call from Taylor in Rome. He had placed it earlier with the request that she confirm his denial. But Liz refused to quell rumors.

“You know,” the embarrassed singer said, “you can ask a woman to do something and she doesn’t always do it.”

**MARCH 11, 222**

**The Brattiest Kid in Human History**

> With predecessors as infamous as Nero and Caligula, it seems ludicrous that a mere boy might equal them in depravity. But during a four-year reign that began in 218—when he was just 14—the Roman emperor Elagabalus managed to do just that.

Perhaps it was the teenager’s *five* marriages—including one forcibly imposed on a sacred Vestal Virgin—that alienated him from his subjects. Or his numerous boyfriends. Or his penchant for cross-dressing as a prostitute, and behaving like one, too. Or maybe people just didn’t appreciate his “subtle” sense of humor—especially when they woke up with wild animals roaming their bedrooms, or sat on the prototype whoopee cushions the emperor had placed on their seats. Whatever the case, Elagabalus was doomed. He was so unpopular, in fact, that even his own grandmother turned against the young emperor and helped to arrange his assassination.

On March 11, 222, the 18-year-old appeared in public with his cousin Alexander, whom he suspected of being more highly regarded than he was. This was confirmed when a crowd of soldiers began cheering for Alexander while ignoring Elagabalus entirely.
Furious at their act of brazen insubordination, the emperor ordered them all executed. But it was he who was slain instead. The ancient writer Cassius Dio left a vivid account of Elagabalus’s violent reckoning:

“His mother, who embraced him and clung tightly to him, perished with him; their heads were cut off and their bodies, after being stripped naked, were first dragged all over the city, then the mother’s body was cast aside somewhere or other while his was thrown into the [Tiber River].”

MARCH 12, 1951

Not Just a Rat, but a Lying Rat: Ethel Rosenberg’s Brother

Ethel Rosenberg very well may have conspired with her husband, Julius, in selling out her country to the Soviets in the 1940s. But the government had precious little evidence to prove it. Not, that is, until her brother and confessed atomic spy, David Greenglass, perjured himself at the trial that sent his sister straight to Sing Sing’s electric chair.

Having admittedly slipped secrets out of Los Alamos, New Mexico, where he worked as a relatively lowly Army mechanic on the Manhattan Project (the U.S. development of the nuclear bomb during World War II), Greenglass had a lot at stake when he testified against his sister. He had been indicted for his crimes, but not yet convicted. Leniency had been dangled before him, and for his wife and co-conspirator, Ruth, as well. She still remained free, in fact; his cooperation assured that. But the authorities wanted something big in return: Ethel Rosenberg. And on March 12, 1951, during his second day of testimony, David Greenglass served his sister up to them on a platter.
March

Until that time, there was little to indicate Ethel had done anything illegal. Yes, she had been an active member of the Communist Party, and logic dictated that at least she had to be aware of her husband Julius’s espionage activities. But not even secretly intercepted and deciphered Soviet cables—later revealed as the Venona project—offered any trace of her overt cooperation. “The [Justice] Department has advised that they do not believe there is sufficient evidence to charge Ethel Rosenberg,” noted William Whelan of the FBI. Yet she was arrested anyway, as a hostage to be held in order to force Julius Rosenberg—the main Soviet mole—to reveal the names of more spies.

But neither Rosenberg cooperated, and so now it was vital to get Ethel convicted. Fortunately for the authorities, Ruth Greenglass, still walking free, suddenly recalled a detail before the trial she had neglected to mention before. It was her sister-in-law Ethel, she said, who typed up the notes and summations of what David Greenglass had learned at Los Alamos. The prosecution now had its so-called smoking gun, which David dutifully regurgitated on the stand, with a sickening smile across his face. Alas, it was a lie.

Chief prosecutor Irving Saypol dramatically played up Greenglass’s false revelation during his trial summation: “This description of the atom bomb, destined for delivery to the Soviet Union, was typed up by the defendant Ethel Rosenberg. . . . Just so had she, on countless other occasions, sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country in the interests of the Soviets.”
Two years later, with all appeals exhausted and presidential clemency denied, Ethel Rosenberg, along with her husband, was executed at Sing Sing on June 19, 1953. The brother who sent her to the electric chair was chagrined by the 15-year sentence he received, although also gratified that his wife and fellow traitor never served a moment behind bars. He was released after a decade and slipped into anonymity, his legacy as a rat cemented.

“You know, I seldom use the word ‘sister’ anymore,” Green-glass told journalist Sam Roberts years later, admitting at the same time that he had lied about Ethel. “I’ve just wiped it out of my mind.”

MARCH 13, 1881

The Tsar Runs Out—and So Does His Luck

They shot at him repeatedly, planted a bomb under his train, and even blew up his dining room at the Winter Palace. But the terrorists just couldn’t kill Russia’s Alexander II—even if their merciless pursuit did take a terrible toll on his nerves. “Am I such a wild beast that they should hound me to death?” the shaken tsar cried out after yet another failed assassination attempt. Alas, the answer was yes. On March 13, 1881, the killers’ luck would change. As Alexander was traveling on a St. Petersburg street, a young man hurled a bomb at his carriage. It exploded, killing and maiming several bystanders, but the tsar was unharmed. Yet after he emerged from the mangled carriage to confront his would-be killer and inspect the damage, a second assassin threw another bomb. This time, it hit its mark. Alexander II—known as the Tsar-Liberator for having freed Russia’s long-suffering serfs—was
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carried back to the Winter Palace, his legs shattered. And there he bled to death.

MARCH 14, 1899

The Owner Who Sent His Own Team to the Showers

Chris von der Ahe was one of baseball’s true originals—the interfering owner of the St. Louis Browns (later Cardinals) who knew next to nothing of the game and came with a flamboyant showman’s personality as outsize as the statue of himself he erected outside his ballpark. “I am der poss bresident of der Prowns!” he proclaimed proudly in his thick German accent. Sadly, von der Ahe lost his beloved “Prowns” on March 14, 1899, when his numerous creditors forced an auction of the team on the steps of the St. Louis Courthouse. The affable owner—later eulogized by Charles Comiskey as “the grandest figure baseball has ever known”—was inconsolable. Yet the sale of the Browns wasn’t half as devastating for him as it would prove to be for the rival Cleveland Spiders.

In a monopolistic move—perfectly legal at the time—the Browns were purchased by Frank DeHaas Robison, who also happened to own the Spiders—a fairly decent team with a roster of several brilliant players, including future Hall of Famer Cy Young. The only problem with the Spiders was the halfhearted Cleveland fans and their sporadic game attendance. They hated Robison, and he loathed them right back. The situation with the Browns was the exact opposite: an enthusiastic baseball city with a losing
team. Robison solved the problem by gutting the Spiders of their best players, including Young, and moving them to St. Louis, a maneuver from which Cleveland would never recover. Indeed, the Spiders emerged from the 1899 season as the worst performing team in baseball history.*

MARCH 15, 44 B.C. AND 1917

Beware Indeed: 2 Ides, 2 Emperors

“Beware the Ides of March.”
—Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2

Thanks to Shakespeare’s immortal line, Caesar usually gets all the attention for his bad day in 44 B.C. Sure he was betrayed by Brutus and stabbed to death in the Roman Senate, but the Ides of March was no picnic for Nicholas II of Russia either. After a tumultuous reign of over two decades, culminating in a massive revolution sparked by bread shortages and widespread discontent over Russian defeats in World War I, the tsar was forced to abdicate his throne on March 15, 1917. Thus, Nicholas became the last of an imperial line that stretched back centuries.**

* So pathetic were the Spiders that they spent the last half of the season on the road, far away from their merciless “fans,” which earned the team any number of withering monikers from the press corps: Misfits, Exiles, Discards, Remnants, Outcasts, Cast Adrifts, Wandering Willies, Tramps, Caudal Appendages, Homeless Ones.

** The following year, on July 17, 1918, the deposed sovereign—who as a young man had watched his grandfather Alexander II bleed to death after a bomb blew up beneath him (see March 13)—was murdered by the Bolsheviks, along with his entire family, just outside the Siberian city of Ekaterinburg.
March

MARCH 16, 1861

Whittle Big Man: Sam Houston’s Last Stand Against Secession

Sam Houston fought valiantly for the independence of Texas from Mexico, served twice as the president of the Republic of Texas, maneuvered Texas into the Union, represented Texas in the U.S. Senate, and then became governor of Texas. In many ways, Sam Houston was Texas. But on March 16, 1861, the people of Texas turned on him.

Secessionist fervor had been festering in the state since the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Houston vigorously opposed the movement—not because of any abolitionist sentiment (he was a slave owner) or ambivalence about state rights, but simply because he believed it would prove a crippling disaster. No one listened.

In fact, the governor’s opposition was not only ignored but also actively circumvented by forces even more powerful than he. On February 1, 1861, a convention of delegates, illegally convened, declared Texas’ secession from the Union—a position later backed by popular referendum. Now it remained for Houston to either officially approve the decision and swear fealty to the Confederacy, or face the consequences.

On the morning of March 16, after an agonizing struggle the night before, the governor made up his mind. “Margaret,” he said to his wife, “I will never do it.” He then went to the State Capitol, took a seat in his office, whittling to occupy himself, and awaited his inevitable exile and disgrace.

Before he was unceremoniously driven out of office that March day, Houston had prepared a message to the people of Texas: “Fellow Citizens, in the name of your rights and liberty, which I believe have been trampled upon, I refuse to take this [secession] oath . . . [But] I love Texas too well to bring civil strife and bloodshed upon
Taylor takes a fierce right from Chávez before an even worse blow from the referee.

MARCH 17, 1990

Stopping Lightning in Its Path: The Referee’s Low Blow

The fight was billed “Thunder and Lightning”—the ultimate light welterweight showdown between two evenly matched, undefeated world champions, Julio César Chávez and Meldrick Taylor. Round after round, the clash lived up to every bit of hype it had generated as Chávez delivered his thunder-packed punches and Taylor retaliated with his own dazzling, lightning-fast blows. It was her. I shall make no endeavor to maintain my authority as Chief Executive of this state . . . I am . . . stricken down because I will not yield those principles which I have fought for . . . The severest pang is that the blow comes in the name of the state of Texas.”
Taylor who dominated on the scorecards, but Chávez’s relentless pounding was taking a pulverizing toll. Then, in the 12th round, the already thrilling match became historic—not due as much to either Thunder or Lightning, but to Steele—Richard Steele, the referee with what many consider the worst sense of timing ever.

While Chávez would need a knockout to win, Taylor merely had to survive the round. But his corner urged him not to play it safe. Battered and bloody, Taylor nevertheless listened and went in hard. And that’s when Chávez nailed him with a right that floored him in a corner. Taylor got right back up, but he was either too dazed or too distracted to respond to a question Steele asked him. It was then that the referee made one of the most controversial decisions in boxing history, one that many still say robbed Taylor of his just glory. Steele stopped the fight—with only two seconds remaining.

MARCH 18, 1990

Heist Almighty:
The Boston Museum Caper

Yes, it was bad when the “Mona Lisa” was stolen from the Louvre in 1911. But after two years spent stashed away in a trunk by the thief (a museum employee, as it turned out), Leonardo da Vinci’s enigmatic lady was returned to her rightful place in the Paris museum. There have been no such happy endings (yet?) for the priceless paintings and other works of art snatched from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston—the largest theft of private property in American history.

Shortly after midnight on March 18, 1990, two thieves disguised as Boston police officers showed up at the museum and, speaking through the intercom system, claimed to be responding to a
Bad Days in History

disturbance. A habitually stoned security guard buzzed them right in. Then, having successfully breached the first line of defense, the thieves efficiently disabled the second when they confronted the guard and, pretending to recognize him on an old arrest warrant, told him to step away from the desk. He obeyed, without ever thinking to ring the silent alarm. Now there was no stopping the intruders.

After binding the guard and his partner and handcuffing them to a basement pipe, the pair began their rampage through the museum’s treasured-filled rooms, ripping works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Manet, and Degas right out of their frames. They also swiped a magnificent Chinese vase and a finial from the top of a pole support for a Napoleonic silk flag. And though the FBI has followed a number of promising leads, the great works haven’t been seen since.

“Think of how bored they get,” wrote novelist John Updike in a poem about the stolen paintings, “stacked in the warehouse somewhere, say in Mattapan, gazing at the back of the butcher paper they are wrapped in, instead of at the rapt, glad faces of those who love art.” Empty frames that once held masterpieces now hang in their original display places as poignant reminders of the devastating loss—and the hope for their eventual return.

MARCH 19, 1919

Uncle Sam Wants You!

It seemed like such a swell idea at the time—at least to the U.S. Navy brass. Rumors were rife around the naval base at Newport, Rhode Island, that certain sailors were consorting inappropriately, not with the ladies of the town, but with each other. A court of inquiry was held, and on March 19, 1919, it concluded that the government must devote “any expense and time necessary” to conduct a “most thorough and searching investigation . . . made
March

by a corps of highly experienced investigators.” And who would these intrepid fact finders be? Why, other sailors, of course. As the head of the investigation noted, a “good looking man,” somewhere between 19 and 24, would be best suited for “this class of work, with reference to perverts.”

But it wouldn’t be enough for the young men recruited for the sting operation to simply infiltrate the gay underground and identify their wayward fellows; they were instructed to provide positive proof by actually engaging with the targeted men—intimately. After Assistant Secretary of the Navy (and future U.S. president) Franklin D. Roosevelt signed off on the scheme, the young operatives took to their task with patriotic zeal. The sailors they netted were then court-martialed, with the secret agents providing lurid testimony of their encounters.

So successful was the sting that the Navy expanded the trap to nab Newport civilians as well. And that’s when they ran into trouble. A popular local minister was arrested, which prompted his friends and supporters to send an outraged letter to President Woodrow Wilson that was also printed in the Providence Journal:

“It must be evident to every thoughtful mind that the use of such vile methods cannot fail to undermine the character and ruin the morals of the unfortunate youths detailed for this duty, render no citizen of the community safe from suspicion and calumny, bring the city into unwarranted reproach, and shake the faith of the people in the wisdom and integrity of the naval administration.”

A series of official hearings followed, culminating in a Senate investigation. This time it wasn’t homosexual sailors in the crosshairs, but the methods their superiors used to root them out. Roosevelt was sharply rebuked for his part in what the investigating committee called “a most deplorable, disgraceful and unnatural proceeding”—a conclusion that The New York Times reported with the blaring headline: LAY NAVY SCANDAL TO F. D. ROOSEVELT . . . DETAILS ARE UNPRINTABLE.
Bad Days in History

MARCH 20, 1966

When Britain Almost Didn’t Have a World Cup to Win

Britain’s national pride took a severe beating on March 20, 1966—not quite as bad as its steady loss of empire, but almost. Sometime between 11 a.m. and noon that day, thieves managed to swipe the precious Jules Rimet Trophy, the original prize awarded to winners of the World Cup, from its supposedly secure display case in London’s Westminster Central Hall. The football (i.e., soccer) world was aghast at the sheer carelessness that Britain, which was to host the World Cup later that summer, demonstrated in caring for the esteemed trophy.

“It would never have happened in Brazil,” declared Abrain Tebel of the champion Brazilian federation. “Even Brazilian thieves love football and would never commit this sacrilege.”

Fortunately, the trophy was found a week later when a dog named Pickles happened to sniff it out while on a walk with its master. With Britain’s battered image fortuitously salvaged, Pickles became a national hero. But the Jules Rimet Trophy didn’t fare quite as well. It was sent to Brazil, where, despite Tebel’s grandiose pronouncement about the sanctity of football in that country, it was stolen in 1983—and never recovered.
If ever an International Day of Ignorance and Intolerance is established, March 21 might well be the perfect choice. After all, that woeful date has been witness to so many assaults on reason, justice, and basic human decency over the centuries that it should at the very least qualify for recognition.

- 1349: Thousands of Jews were slaughtered in the German town of Erfurt after being accused of causing the devastating plague known as the Black Death.
- 1556: Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, a leader of the English Reformation and compiler of the *Book of Common Prayer*, was burned at the stake for heresy by Queen “Bloody” Mary I.
- 1861: Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens declared in his “Cornerstone Address” that “Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite ideas [of the United States Constitution]; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition.”
- 1925: Tennessee governor Austin Peay signed into law the Butler Act, which made it illegal to teach in public schools “any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” In other words: Darwin’s theory of evolution was kicked out of class.
- 1933: The Nazis announced the opening of their first concentration camp, Dachau.
- 1960: Police in the South African township of Sharpeville opened fire on a large group of protesters who objected to the
Bad Days in History

severe segregation policies of the white-run government. As a result, 69 people were killed, and 180 injured—a terrible toll that one police commander later tried to justify. “The native mentality does not allow them to gather for a peaceful demonstration,” insisted Lt. Col. D. H. Pienaar. “For them to gather means violence.”

Yet if March 21 doesn’t quite cut it for the commemoration date of sheer human lunacy . . . well, there’s always March 22.

MARCH 22, 1144, 1630, 1692, 1871, 1943, and 1984

Wait, There’s More!

Maybe March 21 could serve as International Day of Ignorance and Intolerance Eve, which would then allow for recognition of all the human abominations of March 22 as well. After all, there have been too many to overlook:

• 1144: The body of a 12-year-old boy named William was found in a forest just outside Norwich, England, an ordinary enough event in those dark and brutal times—until a zealous monk by the name of Thomas of Monmouth came along and made him a martyr. In his epic biography, The Life and Passion of William of Norwich, the monk stated that the child had been sacrificed by Jews in a gruesome ritual mocking the crucifixion of Jesus—a fantastical tale with devastating implications. Many experts consider the book to be the origin of what historian Alan Dundes called “one of the most bizarre and dangerous legends ever created by the human imagination,” the Blood Libel. This widespread belief that Jews routinely killed Christian children in secret rituals has endured
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for nearly nine centuries, influenced anti-Semites from Martin Luther to Adolf Hitler, and caused untold misery to millions of innocent people over the centuries.

• 1630: Anne Hutchinson—“the instrument of Satan,” as Governor John Winthrop called her—was banished from Massachusetts for having dared to challenge the colony’s theocratic establishment. Hutchinson believed that a person could reach God through personal intuition, rather than through the observance of institutionalized laws and the precepts of ministers. “As I do understand it,” she wrote, “laws, commands, rules, and edicts are for those who have not the light which makes plain the pathway.”

• 1692: More enlightenment from Massachusetts, Governor Winthrop’s “Shining City Upon a Hill”: A contingent of Salem residents came to Rebecca Nurse’s home to inform her that she had been accused of witchcraft. Meanwhile, that same day, Rebecca Nurse’s specter popped in to see Ann Carr Putnam and, according to Putnam, threatened “to tear my soul out of my body” if she refused to serve Satan.


• 1943: The Nazis herded the entire population of the village of Khatyn, Belarus, into a shed, covered the structure with straw, and set it on fire. Those who managed to escape the inferno were immediately shot.

• 1984: Mass hysteria in Manhattan Beach, California, culminated with the indictment of seven teachers and administrators at the McMartin preschool, charged with hundreds of counts of child abuse. Coaxed by “experts” from Children’s Institute International, the little ones reported not only sexual abuse but also satanic rituals involving the dismemberment of babies and the exhumation of corpses. The trial of the “McMartin Seven,” one of the longest and most expensive in history, ended with
total vindication for the defendants. But given the lives ruined, it was a shallow victory.

MARCH 23, 1989

Massive Con-Fusion: The “Discovery” That Left Scientists Cold

It was the scientific breakthrough of the century, or certainly appeared to be. On March 23, 1989, two respected chemists, B. Stanley Pons, professor of chemistry at the University of Utah, and his colleague Martin Fleischmann of the University of Southampton in England, announced in a press conference that they had achieved a positively Promethean feat by replicating the energy of the sun in a process they called “cold fusion.” And, all the more astonishing, they did it at room temperature in a simple glass jar of water.

“We’ve established a sustained fusion reaction by means that are considerably simpler than conventional techniques,” Professor Pons declared.

The implications of such an achievement were staggering: Rather than producing energy by smashing atoms apart, as with conventional nuclear reactors, cold fusion essentially forced them together in a relatively simple process that would give the world an endless supply of cheap, clean energy.

The Wall Street Journal and other major news outlets trumpeted the discovery on their front pages, but other scientists were skeptical... very skeptical. Dr. Steven E. Koonin of Caltech, for one, bluntly insisted that the cold fusion report was merely a reflection of “the incompetence and delusion of Pons and Fleischmann.”

The controversy began immediately after the scientists gave their news conference. Mass media was most definitely not the way the scientific community was used to receiving information of important
discoveries. Usually such matters were first published for review in scholarly journals, something Pons and Fleischmann's sponsors at the University of Utah neglected to do. Worse, they refused to address specific questions or provide details about the cold fusion process.

“This was no mere breach of etiquette,” wrote Robert L. Park, author of *Voodoo Science: The Road From Foolishness to Fraud*. “The integrity of science is anchored in the willingness of scientists to test their ideas and results in direct confrontation with their scientific peers. That standard of scientific conduct was being flagrantly violated by the University of Utah.” Then there was the small matter of nuclear radiation. If what Pons and Fleischmann were claiming was true, noted nuclear physicist Frank Close, their lab should have been “the hottest source of radiation west of Chernobyl.” Even the physicists at the University of Utah joked among themselves about their colleague’s suspicious findings: “Have you heard the bad news about the research assistant in Pons’s lab? He’s in perfect health.”

Yet despite all the scientific sneering, there was nevertheless a mad rush at labs across the world to somehow replicate the cold fusion experiments from what little information could be gleaned. All were unsuccessful. But the question remained: Had Pons and Fleischmann perpetuated a massive hoax, or had they simply misinterpreted important data? “I was convinced for a while it was absolute fraud,” Richard D. Petrasso, a fusion scientist at MIT, said in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1991. “Now I’ve softened. They probably believed in what they were doing.”

**March 24, 1603**

**Sir Walter, Treated Rawly Indeed**

Elizabeth I adored her dashing courtier, the man perhaps most responsible for launching the British Empire, Sir Walter
Raleigh.* As for the queen’s successor, James I: Well, simply put, the sovereign’s esteem died with Elizabeth. “Raleigh, Raleigh, I have heard but rawly of thee,” the new king remarked upon first meeting the great poet and explorer—the negative pun on his name glaringly apparent. Indeed, Raleigh’s numerous enemies in Elizabeth’s backbiting court—resentful of his power and influence with the queen—had already thoroughly poisoned the next monarch against him. And so it was that upon Elizabeth’s death and James’s accession on March 24, 1603, Raleigh’s fortunes began their precipitous slide. Still, it would take another 15 years for him to actually lose his head.

King James began his reign with a petty assault on Raleigh’s privileges, snatching away his lucrative monopolies—the main source of his income—and insisting upon the return of his London home, Durham House. Four months later, the “damnably proud” Raleigh would be on trial for his life—charged with treason for allegedly conspiring with Spain to dethrone James I and replace him with his cousin Arbella Stuart. It was a sham of a proceeding, about which one of the judges involved later said, “The justice of England has never been so degraded and injured.”

Prosecutor Sir Edward Coke, determined to get the verdict King James desired, spewed every manner of invective at the very symbol of the golden Elizabethan era: “a viper . . . the rankest traitor in all England . . . a spider of hell . . . a monster . . . [author of] the most horrible practices that ever came out of the bottomless pit of the lowest hell.” But, for all that, Coke didn’t have a case—only hearsay produced by Raleigh’s enemies. The defendant’s pleas to confront his main accuser were abruptly denied. “There must

* That’s not to say Elizabeth didn’t clash with Raleigh—especially when he secretly married the queen’s lady-in-waiting without her permission in 1591 and found himself (along with his bride) clapped into the Tower as a wedding gift.
not such a gap be opened for the destruction of the King [i.e.,
the state’s case] as would be if we should grant this,” declared the
Lord Chief Justice.

Despite the preordained guilty verdict, Raleigh acquitted himself well throughout the rigged trial. “Never man spoke better for himself,” recalled one contemporary observer. “So worthily, so wisely, so temperately he behaved himself that in half a day the

Poet and explorer Sir Walter Raleigh, imprisoned in the Tower of London
mind of all the company was changed from the extremest hate to
the extremest pity.” The day before his scheduled execution, King
James granted Raleigh a reprieve, of sorts. Instead of the scaffold,
he was sent to the Tower of London, where he would remain a
prisoner for the next 13 years and write his magisterial *History of
the World*. Then, in 1616, Raleigh was released and sent on a voy-
age to the New World to try, once again, to find the fabled, gold-
laden city of El Dorado. The lure of gold in that mythical city
apparently trumped the king’s long-standing grudge. But there
were to be no riches, only revenge.

During the disastrous expedition, the English adventurers came
into conflict with the Spanish in South America. Raleigh had been
far away from the fighting, during which his son had been killed,
but the Spanish ambassador nevertheless demanded retribution.
King James was only too happy to oblige. There would be no
open trial this time, for James remembered well how “by his wit
[Raleigh] turned the hatred of men into compassion.” Essentially,
he would be summarily executed on the old charge of treason.

On October 29, 1618, the deed was done—despite even the
pleas of the king’s own wife. Observing the ax that would in
moments decapitate him, Raleigh was heard to muse, “This is a
sharp medicine, but it is a physician for all diseases and miseries.”

MARCH 25, 1988

... And Ebola Is a Bunny-Wunny

“That virus is a pussycat.”

—Peter Duesberg, professor of molecular biology,
University of California, Berkeley, in the March 25,
1988, edition of the journal Science, rejecting the data
that established the human immunodeficiency virus,
known as HIV, as the cause of AIDS
March

MARCH 26, 1953

For Jonas Salk,
No Vaccine Against the Critics

“He’s a folk hero, even though he is . . . not very bright.”

—Renowned scientist Roger Revelle
on polio vaccine developer Jonas Salk

The panic was intense and widespread as the polio virus continued to render thousands of youngsters paralyzed and, in some cases, unable to breathe without being encased in a so-called iron lung. But in the winter of 1953—the same year 35,000 additional cases of polio were reported in the United States—salvation from the dread scourge seemed imminent as news reports of a potential vaccine began to trickle out of Pittsburgh. That worried Jonas Salk—or, as his numerous critics in the scientific community maintained, excited him with visions of celebrity. The young researcher had indeed obtained some positive results from his trials, but the vaccine had yet to be perfected.

So Salk went to his patron, Basil O’Connor, co-founder (with polio sufferer President Franklin D. Roosevelt) of what became known as the March of Dimes, and obtained radio time either to temper public expectations, as Salk claimed, or, as his enemies insisted, to reap premature acclaim.
Bad Days in History

The response to the national radio program that aired on March 26, 1953, was predictably divided.

“Salk became the embodiment of a vaccine that would soon save the world from polio,” wrote author Paul A. Offit. “To the public, he was an immediate hero. But members of the scientific community criticized Salk for talking about unpublished data and for pandering to the media. The radio address marked the beginning of an animosity that Salk would suffer for the rest of his life.”

Indeed, Salk’s fellow scientists were left seething with resentment and professional jealousy. “Whether he believes it or not, Jonas went on the air that night to take a bow and become a public hero,” observed one critic. “And that’s what he became.” Albert Sabin, Salk’s rival in polio vaccine research,* was particularly venomous. “It was pure kitchen chemistry,” Sabin later said. “Salk didn’t discover anything.”

Salk’s reputation among his peers as an inconsequential showboat was such that little of his subsequent research was ever taken seriously. He never won a Nobel Prize, nor was he welcomed into the prestigious National Academy of Sciences. The snubs rankled, but several years before his death in 1995, Salk seemed philosophical.

“I received an inordinate amount of attention and recognition, out of proportion to what was contributed scientifically,” he said in a 1991 interview. “It came about altogether because of the relief from fear. It was a human response on the part of the public. But from the point of view of the scientific community, they would see it differently. That was an adverse side effect. But it also provided opportunities in other ways. These are the prices; one has to pay for the pluses as well as the minuses.”

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*Sabin developed an oral polio vaccine that contained weakened forms of the virus, which eventually supplanted for a time Salk’s “killed” vaccine.
March

MARCH 27, 1908

Talk About Intemperance!

If there were two things Representative James Thomas “Cotton Tom” Heflin couldn’t stand (besides women voting—see January 12) they were blacks sharing public transportation with whites and the consumption of alcoholic beverages. So of course the prohibitionist congressman from Alabama, who had just unsuccessfully introduced a measure that would segregate the streetcars of Washington, D.C.,* was a bit perturbed when he boarded a trolley near the Capitol on the evening of March 27, 1908—on his way to a temperance meeting—and found Lewis (or Thomas) Lumby not only sitting there but drinking whiskey as well.

When his remonstrations to put away the bottle were met with “vile epithets” from “the negro,” as The New York Times reported at the time, the enraged Heflin tossed Lumby off the streetcar. Then, when his adversary continued to sass him from the street, the congressman naturally shot at him. The bullet missed, though, and hit a bystander in the toe. Undeterred, Heflin fired again, this time wounding Lumby in the head. He was arrested and charged with assault with intent to kill, and, after being accorded all due courtesy at the police station, released on bail. Cotton Tom was never tried for the shooting, which he later cited as one of the greatest accomplishments of his career. After serving 12 more years in the House, he was elected to the Senate, all the while keeping busy as a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

*And he once proudly proclaimed, “God Almighty intended the Negro to be the servant of the white man.”
MARCH 28, 193

Going, Going, Gone!

After a century or so of frequent royal assassinations, the Roman Empire hit a new low on March 28, 193, when the elite and swaggering Praetorian Guard slaughtered Emperor Pertinax—ruler of just three months—for having dared try to restore order and discipline among their ranks. Then, later the same day, the Guard did something even more infamous when they offered the imperial throne to the highest bidder at auction.

“When this proclamation was known,” the ancient historian Herodian of Syria wrote, “the more honorable and weighty Senators, and all persons of noble origin and property, would not approach the [Guard] barracks to offer money in so vile a manner for a besmirched sovereignty.”

But there was one wealthy senator, Didius Julianus, who was not particularly honorable or weighty (in the consequential sense)—in fact, he was notoriously debauched. Prodded by his ambitious wife and daughter, Julianus rushed over to the barracks to make his bid. The Guard, however, wouldn’t let him inside. So, standing outside the walls, Julianus shouted his offers against a competing bidder inside the compound, who just happened to be the slain emperor Pertinax’s father-in-law.

Having offered a fortune, Julianus eventually won the bidding—although, in this case, winning was relative. The people of Rome were disgusted by the charade. Rather than obeisance, they threw rocks at the new emperor, and, as Herodian reported, “hooted and reviled him as having bought the throne with lucre at an auction.” Two months later, Septimius Severus deposed him. “But what evil have I done?” Julianus reportedly cried as he was dragged away to be beheaded. “Whom have I killed?”
There was nothing particularly special about Yaoya Oshichi, a grocer’s daughter living in 17th-century Japan. Indeed, her memory undoubtedly would have been lost to history had it not been for the extraordinary circumstances of her death—a tale of romance so tragic that it enshrined the 16-year-old girl forever in Japanese literature and theater.

In 1682, a great fire erupted in Edo (now Tokyo), forcing Yaoya and her family to seek refuge in a local temple. There she met Ikuta Shōnosuke, a temple page with whom she soon found herself in love. Sadly, though, the budding romance was destined to last only as long as the family found shelter in the temple. After Yaoya and her family returned home, the young couple was separated. Desperate to reconnect, the girl did something that would have made sense only to a lovelorn teenager: She started a fire in her own home, hoping to re-create the circumstances under which she first met Ikuta.

The penalty for arson in Japan at the time was burning at the stake, but only those above the age of 15 were allowed to be executed. The magistrate hearing Yaoya’s case was inclined to mercy and intended to spare the girl from the fearsome penalty. “You must be 15 years old, aren’t you?” he said. Alas, Yaoya mistook his meaning and responded that she was actually 16. Exasperated, the judge tried again. “You must be 15 years old, are you not?” he repeated firmly. Again, the frightened Yaoya gave her true age. It was enough to doom her, and on March 29, 1683, the girl who couldn’t take a hint was consumed by the flames.
MARCH 30, 1750
The “Surgeon” Who Cut the Daylights Out of Two Great Composers

He was the eye surgeon to the stars, with such luminaries as Britain’s King George II and the pope as satisfied clients—or so he claimed. In reality, though, John Taylor was little more than a self-promoting quack—“an instance of how far impudence will carry ignorance,” as the famed writer Samuel Johnson described him. With the adopted titles “Chevalier” or “Ophthalmiater Royal,” Taylor rode from town to town in a carriage emblazoned with painted eyeballs, made grandiose speeches before gathered crowds at each surgery, and left a long trail of blinded people in his wake. One of them was Johann Sebastian Bach.

The great composer had long suffered poor eyesight, but as his condition worsened, he had the misfortune of meeting the itinerant Taylor, who had just arrived in Leipzig to great fanfare. On March 30, 1750, the celebrity oculist plunged his sharpened instruments into the musical genius’s eyes. Then he applied a healing poultice of pigeon’s blood, pulverized salt, and just a dash of mercury. After several days, the procedure was repeated—to no avail. Bach was left entirely sightless and in excruciating pain. Four months later, he was dead. But “Chevalier” Taylor was by no means finished with the world’s greatest composers. Eight years later he permanently blinded Handel as well.
The Ughscars: Celebrating the Worst of Hollywood With the Golden Raspberries

There once was a time when awful films, with equally awful acting, quietly slipped away—ideally with few taking much notice. But then along came the Golden Raspberry Awards, or the Razzies, to cast a harsh spotlight on these cinematic embarrassments and celebrate the very worst of Hollywood. The ceremony of shame, first held on March 31, 1981, always takes place on the eve of the Oscars, as if to accentuate the contrast between the brilliant and the truly execrable, and has become the bane of many a bad actor.

Madonna and Sylvester Stallone have been particularly notable for their wooden work, and each has been awarded a record number of Razzies as a result. The Material Girl, who probably should have stuck with music, has garnered an impressive 15 nominations, and won 9 for her “acting” in such gems as Swept Away and Body of Evidence. She even scored a nod playing herself in Truth or Dare. Stallone’s work has been similarly well received by the Raspberry Academy: 30 nominations and 10 awards for such nuanced roles as Rocky/Rambo. To cap their spectacularly successful Razzie run, the two were given special awards in 2000, honoring them as the worst actor and worst actress of the entire 20th century. Neither showed up to accept.