

CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH MARS

This month and next Earth is catching up with Mars, an encounter that will culminate in the closest approach between the two planets in recorded history. The next time Mars may come this close is in 2287. Due to the way Jupiter's gravity tugs on Mars and perturbs its orbit, astronomers can only be certain that Mars has not come this close to Earth in the last 5,000 years but it may be as long as 60,000 years.

The encounter will culminate on August 27th when Mars comes to within 34,649,589 miles and will be (next to the moon) the brightest object in the night sky. It will attain a magnitude of -2.9 and will appear 25.11 arc seconds wide. At a modest 75-power magnification Mars will look as large as the full moon to the naked eye.

Mars will be easy to spot. At the beginning of August Mars will rise in the east at 10 p.m. and reach its azimuth at about 3 a.m. But by the end of August when the two planets are closest, Mars will rise at nightfall and reach its highest point in the sky at 12:30 a.m. That's pretty convenient when it comes to seeing something that no human has seen in recorded history.

So, mark your calendar at the beginning of August to see Mars grow progressively brighter and brighter throughout the month.

No one alive today will ever see this again.

- - - - -

Va. Mountain Town Moves to Higher Ground By CHRIS KAHN .c *The Associated Press*

GRUNDY, Va. (AP) - Like many of the crumbling buildings in this remote Appalachian coal town, the old brick fire station would have been better off on stilts.

The river that snakes through Grundy has swallowed it countless times, coating everything with a powdery muck that spills onto the floor whenever fireman David Yates playfully kicks a wall. The Levisa Fork is still master here, slowly eating away everything in its flood plain. To survive, this town of 1,100 is doing the only sensible thing - it's begun to move.

Piece by piece, many of the water-stained buildings along Main Street will be knocked down during the next few years while the town rebuilds across the river.

The project is part of a mammoth \$177 million revitalization plan to move the very mountain that once confined Grundy to the river's edge. Already, crews have blasted away 300 feet of steep mountainside, cutting out 13 acres of flat land where Grundy leaders are planning a new town center, upscale apartments and space for restaurants and retail stores.

An elevated four-lane highway will act as a flood wall to protect what remains on the other side, including the historic Buchanan County courthouse and the Grundy Bible Church.

Yates, 34, Grundy's only paid firefighter, was the first to go. Last week he transferred to a brand new fire station overlooking the scraped-out lot where much of the town center will go. The old station was knocked down Monday. Yates said he is all for bulldozing waterlogged parts of Grundy if it somehow breathes life into the community. Over the years, he has seen coal miners like his father get older and sicker; school buddies grow up and look for jobs that weren't there.

``I've got friends that have left here and gone," Yates said. ``You just don't see them anymore."''

Grundy is about as far-flung as it gets in Virginia. The pretty strip of brick and clapboard homes is wedged in a tight maze of mountain ridges about 350 miles from the state Capitol in Richmond.

Most residents either work in the coal business or have a family member who did. But the coal industry no longer provides, unemployment in surrounding Buchanan County is double the state average of 4 percent, and Grundy's

population has shriveled. Life is tough here. Even some of the town's brightest prospects have been tarnished by misfortune.

Five years after the town's new law school started classes, a disgruntled former student shot and killed the dean, a professor and another student. The student, Peter Odighizuwa, was declared incompetent to stand trial on murder charges last August.

Town officials say they're getting better, pointing out that the unemployment isn't as bad as the double-digit rates in the 1990s. But the one constant problem that never seems to go away are the floods. When it rains, the Levisa seems to have no boundaries - the steep mountains quickly funnel everything downward, washing over trees and rooftops above while the river banks swell from below.

Every year, the river jumps its banks at least once. In 1977, the flooding was so bad that much of the town center was submerged in 6 feet of water, causing more than \$100 million in damage countywide and killing three people.

"We're not only a distressed area, we're depressed," said Town Manager Chuck Crabtree. "It's the same in a lot of small towns ... people have just lost faith in their community." To Crabtree, Grundy must change to survive. A few dozen buildings and landmarks are worth sacrificing if they'll make room for new companies and a more vibrant economy, he said.

"This town was going to die," Crabtree said. "How could we not take the opportunity that's in front of us?"

When construction is complete, Crabtree said Grundy will be three times its current size, with an additional 9 acres of flat land created by dumping the sandstone rubble from the mountain into nearby Wellmore Hollow. Bridges and a pedestrian walkway will connect each side, and buildings will be linked to high-speed Internet using a system of towers and a broadband wireless system.

Harold Trivett, 79, a former Grundy mayor who owned and managed a clothing store along Main Street starting in 1950, said he doesn't mind losing the old building. "In the '77 flood, I used up all my savings cleaning the mud out of that place," said Trivett, whose son now runs a tobacco shop out of the building. "No. I'm happy to see it go. This will be a new town, a modern town." 07/11/03 02:34 EDT

- - - - -

THIS FROM A FRIEND IN CALIFORNIA: This was forwarded to me from an ex CIA agent who was a Boy Scout in my Troop in 1950. It came to him from a Bechtel employee who was commenting on an anti-Cheney article.

"I rarely respond to this stuff, but you nailed the story so well. We have 96 people resident in country and another 71 in Kuwait waiting for camp accommodation. It is now about 45 days since we were contractually released to mobilize. The people we mobilized come from 7 different parts of Bechtel as this contract cover 7 infrastructure segments: Power, telecoms, ports, airports, water/wastewater, bridges, roads, railroads, schools, hospitals and clinics.

In those 45 days, we have driven and flown the high line across Iraq at low elevation, looked at every major power plant and substation (Most are 30 years old, have never been maintained and are operating at about 40%. Substations have been completely destroyed by looters and the high line is still today being systematically dismantled to harvest the copper conductor and sell to Iran), looked at every major wastewater (Every drop of sewage in Iraq flows directly into the rivers and some plant tanks have been converted to fuel storage) and water treatment plants, taken the train from Syria to Umm Qasr and to the Iranian border (our folks slept on the trains or on the floors in old stations and ate MRE), completely assessed what it would take to get the Baghdad and Basrah airports back in operation (all ground and air traffic control equipment destroyed during war), completed a bathometric survey of the Umm Qasr port (The port is full of unexploded ordnance from the Iran/Iraq and first gulf wars, so you can't just start dredging). Dredged the port of 2.6 cubic meters of silt (The port can now accept grain ships), put the neglected grain handling system back into service after serious cleaning and removing rat infestation (Sadaam was shipping the oil for food grain to Syria and Iran for money so hadn't been used in years). We have also developed a plan for putting country wide telecoms back into service and marched through literally hundreds of schools and clinics to develop a scope of work to get kids back in school by September 15th.

We have mobilized three camps: Baghdad, Umm Qasr, and Basrah. We have also surveyed 45 bridges across Iraq mostly damaged by the war and have started repairs on three which were an immediate safety problem. We have completed a detailed assessment report of the infrastructure and recommendations of where to spend the \$680 mm to get the best bang for the buck and make the most difference. We have committed to using only Iraqi contractors and have worked a good scheme for insurance in the face of no insurance market in Iraq. Private contractors are not in any data base in Iraq so we have moved forward on a big program to get do that so we have somebody other than old regime companies to bid on the work. We are doing the same for Iraqi suppliers. We have a program underway which will restore 1400 looted schools across Iraq (even the toilet fixtures were taken if you can believe that). We currently have around 500 Iraqis being paid through three major contracts and at the port. Over the coming weeks I expect we will have thousands in this program.

We have a \$680mm contract which has only been funded to \$147mm and then only reluctantly. We have scrapped for every cent and we have to work hard every day to get permission to do anything.

You are right, the security situation around Iraq is a problem, threats are frequent as is gunfire and our people have to wear flack jackets when outside the camps. We have to use armed security to do everything and travel across Iraq is by 12 hour military convoy or C130 military flights. The last trip to Baghdad on a C130 took 25 hours from Kuwait City and they slept on the floor in an old building at the airport until the curfew was over and they could come to camp. The road to and from the airport has to be mine cleared each morning by the US Military. Travel everywhere is restricted by an 11pm-7am curfew. Our people in Basrah have been grounded for 2 days now because of a specific threat against American contractors. This sort of thing happens with some frequency.

Your assessment was so close to mark that you could walk in today and do the job. The press in the US is pathetically uninformed. We are working on getting more information out, but they are not really interested in little other than how the contract was awarded and exciting bad news.

We are all working hard every day, all day and you would be proud. Nobody is complaining, we all feel like we are doing the right things even with the frustration and strangely enough most are happy to be here. Besides folks in Bechtel, Iraq is full of good people trying to do the right thing under very difficult circumstances.

- - - - -

Duo Soaks Up Stories About New York City
By ERIN McCLAM .c The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) - It is evening rush hour in the Times Square subway station - perhaps the most frantic time of day at the most hectic place in the busiest city in the country. Everyone is racing somewhere - everyone except Liz Barry and Bill Wetzel, who have settled into two folding chairs against a wall. Before them is their only prop, a 2-foot-high sign that reads, in large white letters, "TALK TO ME."

Stunningly, for the next two hours, people do. Dozens of people.

Two 17-year-old girls in flip-flops talk about their brainbuster of a science class. A middle-aged man holds forth on the Cuban missile crisis. A young woman with purple hair, near tears, talks about a messy breakup. They are the latest of thousands of stories Barry and Wetzel have heard, one stranger at a time, over the past year. They have walked the streets and avenues, set up their sign and listened.

The pair, fresh-faced and in their 20s, tried the gab gig last summer as a two-week experiment, fueled by what Wetzel calls "rabid curiosity." What they found was that hearing the stories of the city is highly addictive. And for the people of New York, a place with a triple-espresso attention span, Barry and Wetzel have come to believe talking is therapeutic.

"Taking a little time out from a busy schedule to talk to someone you've never met can change your whole outlook forever," Barry says. "And this city is such a resource. We never know what part of the world's going to come up and talk to us." Both aspiring teachers, they met two years ago at a high school in Durham, N.C., where Barry was teaching with AmeriCorps and where Wetzel was working as an assistant. They came to New York a year ago with \$1,500 apiece and nowhere to live, relying - as they still do - on friends and friends of friends, on

spare rooms and empty couches and the occasional rooftop.

The cash ran out in December, when a kind woman on the Upper West Side, amused by their hobby, volunteered out of nowhere to bankroll them at \$7 each per day - enough for two cheap meals. Otherwise, they refuse donations.

“We’re not asking for money,” says Barry, 25, who has dark, curly hair and, like her partner, a disarming smile. “We’re not selling anything.” She has repeated the line countless times. It is one of the ways she gets skeptical passers-by to stop. Wetzel, a slender 23-year-old with a schoolboy part in his hair, usually calls out: “How’s your day?”

That is how he lures Collin Poole, a 21-year-old actor passing through the Times Square station. “What are you doing?” she asks, bewildered. Wetzel: “Being friendly.” She breaks into a grin and slaps him five. “Rock on, brother man.” She stays a few minutes, talking about acting.

Later, Denise Stanislaus, an 18-year-old from the Bronx, stops and finds herself talking about how difficult it is to find work in the city, and how to introduce her new boyfriend to her mother. “I could stand here and talk all day,” she says after 45 minutes.

Still, on this night Barry and Wetzel get 10 strange looks for every lingering visitor. In a year, they have been hassled by cops, insulted by drunks, even had their shoes stolen. No one seems to know what to make of them. “People think we’re undercover cops, or psychics, or tarot-card readers, or religious fundamentalists or something,” Wetzel says. “We’ve heard it all. A lot of people think we’re sociology researchers.” Which, in a way, they are. They hear every day about the way people work, the way they date, the way they grow up and settle down.

Barry and Wetzel figure that now, after a year, is a good time to stop. They have no idea what comes next. “This blew our minds so much, we don’t know what we’re going to do,” Wetzel says.

Estela Garcia, another young actor, has seen the pair three times since she moved to New York from Spain last year. She now greets them as old friends. She believes people in America, and in New York particularly, are too shy because they are afraid of rejection, or just afraid of their feelings.

“I mean, tomorrow a car could hit you, and you’re dead,” she says. “If you’re feeling something, you should say it. Imagine what would happen if everybody just started talking to each other. Everybody needs this.”

On the Net: Talk To Me: <http://www.nyctalktome.com> 07/11/03 07:54 EDT

- - - - -

Here’s a link to a story from the New Republic - about Howard Dean
Good Doctor: Dean isn’t running as a hard lefty. He’s running as an angry, honest New Democrat. Which is why he might just win. <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030728&s=cohn072803>

- - - - -

This comes from Insight on the News - <http://www.insightmag.com/news/447801.html>

Posted July 21, 2003
Fair Comment
By Jerome Zeifman

Democrat Line on Iraq War Is Demagoguery Sure to Backfire

Although I am a Democrat, I don’t think that my party deserves to win the presidency next year. One reason is because most of our candidates have become demagogues.

For example, Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia has been insinuating that in starting the Iraq war President

George W. Bush deceitfully relied on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction as "a manufactured excuse ... to seize a country." Ironically, back in October Byrd had warned that "Saddam Hussein has retained some stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, and [is] on a crash course to build up his chemical- and biological-warfare capability."

Like Byrd, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts also has become demagogic, charging that "Bush misled every one of us. That's one reason why I'm running to be president of the United States. I will not let him off the hook throughout this campaign ... because if he lied, he lied to me personally."

As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, Kerry had access to reams of classified documents on which the president's contention was based. He had a duty to review them personally and not rely on the president's word. In that regard, for the senator to say that he was deceived along with "every one of us" is provably false.

On another level I see Kerry as hypocritical. Ironically, in October 1998 he had sent a personal letter to President Bill Clinton stating: "I urge you ... to take necessary actions (including, if appropriate, air and missile strikes on suspect Iraqi sites) to respond effectively to the threat posed by Iraq's refusal to end its weapons of mass destruction programs."

In 1998, in addition to Kerry, 13 other Democratic senators signed an identical letter: Carl Levin of Michigan, Joseph Lieberman and Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, Robert Kerrey of Nebraska, Dianne Feinstein of California, Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, Tom Daschle and Tim Johnson of South Dakota, John Breaux and Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and Wendell Ford of Kentucky. (Eventually Clinton began the bombing of Iraq - on the same day that Monica Lewinsky began testifying to a grand jury of her affair with him.)

Currently, along with Kerry, six candidates in the Democratic presidential primary are denouncing Bush for waging the Iraq war. At the same time, writers for the the New York Times are rivaling Democratic candidates in anti-Bush demagoguery. On May 30, Times columnist Nicholas Kristof (relying entirely on undisclosed sources) charged Bush with using intelligence that was "deliberately warped ... to mislead our elected representatives into voting to authorize [the war]."

On June 3, Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote: "It is long past time for this administration to be held accountable. The public was told that Saddam posed an imminent threat. If that claim was fraudulent, the selling of the war is arguably the worst scandal in American political history - worse than Watergate, worse than Iran-Contra."

To put the issue of weapons of mass destruction in a truthful historical perspective Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on June 8 published an excellent article in the Washington Post stating: "There is something surreal about the charges flying that President Bush lied ... [about weapons of mass destruction]. The absurdity of this charge is mind-boggling. ... Start with this: The Iraqi government in the 1990s admitted to U.N. weapons inspectors that it had produced 8,500 liters of anthrax and a few tons of VX for years."

Kagan also cites the report that chief weapons inspector Hans Blix delivered to the U.N. Security Council on Jan. 27 stating that: (1) there is "no convincing evidence" they were ever destroyed, (2) Iraq possessed enough "bacterial growth media" to produce "5,000 litres of concentrated anthrax," (3) "it is likely that Iraq retains stockpiles of anthrax, botulinum toxin and aflatoxin" and (4) there were 6,500 "chemical bombs" weighing 1,000 tons that Iraq admitted producing but whose whereabouts were unknown.

Kagan also provides detailed quotes from former vice president Al Gore, former CIA director John Deutch and former secretary of defense William Cohen of the Clinton administration, all piously warning the nation of the dangers of Saddam's secret weapons. Finally, Kagan closes his article with excerpts from a speech made by former president Clinton, who stated unequivocally that Iraq had 5,000 gallons of botulinum, 2,000 gallons of anthrax, 25 biological-filled Scud warheads and 157 aerial bombs.

At the conclusion of his speech Clinton warned of "the kind of threat Iraq poses - a rogue state with weapons of mass destruction, ready to use them or provide them to terrorists who travel the world among us unnoticed." Not surprisingly, the demagogues continue to ignore the truths Kagan documented.

On June 28, the Post published an article by Harvard University professor Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a Democratic stalwart, who wrote: "The weapons-of-mass-destruction issue will not subside and disappear as the administration supposes (and hopes). The issue will build because many Americans do not like to be manipulated and deceived. It will build because elements in Congress and in the media will wish to regain their honor and demonstrate their liberation from Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld."

With Democratic propaganda spreading widely, at least one prominent conservative, Paul Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation, now is advising the White House to be prepared for the introduction of impeachment resolutions. Based on my own experience with impeachment politics, I agree with his advice.

In my case, I believe that political parties that thrive on demagoguery destroy themselves. These days I fear that the Democratic Party that I have known for 60 years now may be close to extinction.

Jerome Zeifman (jzeifman@yahoo.com) was the Democratic chief counsel of the House Judiciary Committee during the Nixon impeachment proceedings.

- - - - -

Problem-solving worthy of Orwell
By Molly Ivins
Creators Syndicate

You've got to hand it to those clever little problem-solvers at the White House. What a bunch of brainiacs. They have resolved the entire problem of global warming: They cut it out of the report!

This is genius. Everybody else is mauling on about the oceans rising and the polar icecaps melting and monster storms and hideous droughts, and these guys just edit it out.

"The editing eliminated references to many studies concluding that warming is at least partly caused by rising concentrations of smokestack and tailpipe emissions, and could threaten health and ecosystems," reports The New York Times. Presto -- poof!

What do they care about health and ecosystems? Think of the possibilities presented by this ingenious solution. Let's edit out AIDS and all problems with drugs both legal and illegal. We could get rid of Libya and Syria this way -- take 'em off the maps.

We can do away with unemployment, the uninsured, heart disease, obesity and the coming Social Security crunch. We could try editing out death and taxes, but I don't think we should overreach right away. Just start with something simple, like years of scientific research on global warming, and blue-pencil that sucker out of existence. Denial is not just a river in Egypt.

Inspiring as the remarkable Bush approach to resolving global warming is -- the simplicity of it, the beauty of it, I cannot get over it -- does it not suggest a certain cavalier je ne sais quoi about the future? What I mean is, is anybody there concerned about what happens to people?

I realize that the energy industry and the auto industry and other major campaign contributors would prefer to think global warming does not exist, but how long do you think it will take before reality catches up with all of us? The White House editors (hi, Karl) instead chose to insert a new study on global non-warming funded by -- ta-da! -- the American Petroleum Institute.

Dear old API, author of innumerable ringing editorials on the desperate need to leave the oil depletion allowance at 27% (certain Texas newspapers that shall remain nameless used to run those editorials without changing a single comma), is really swell at representing the oil bidness.

Fond as I am of many of API lobbyists I have known over the years, I am not quite sure I want those bozos calling the shots on global warming. I have watched them buy law and bend regulations for decades now, and although I admire their chutzpah, I am impelled to warn you: They have no scruples, they have no decency, and they have no shame. (See 50 years worth of reporting on the industry by The Texas Observer.) Also, they

lie.

Well now, danged if that doesn't bring us to the subject of lying and the White House. Let us set aside the vexing case of the missing weapons of mass destruction and focus on a few items closer to home.

Anyone remember President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address? No, no, not the one where he said Iraq had a nuclear weapons program. The one where he said he was going to expand AmeriCorps by 50%, from 50,000 up to 75,000, because giving all those young people a chance to work their way through college by doing good for the community is so noble and effective.

"USA Freedom Corps will expand and improve the good efforts of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to recruit more than 200,000 new volunteers," he said.

Two weeks ago, Bush and Republicans in Congress cut AmeriCorps by 80%. According to Jonathan Alter in Newsweek, Congress, under pressure, restored some of it, but it still leaves AmeriCorps with a 58% cut and tens of thousands of fewer participants out there eaching poor kids to read, helping old folks in nursing homes, setting up community gardens, and a thousand other good and useful tasks -- many of which get the young people started on careers in that kind of work.

Alter notes that restoring AmeriCorps to its current level would take \$185 million, about one-half of 1% of the president's latest ax cut for the rich. The radical Republicans in Congress, apparently egged on by a Heritage Foundation study from April 2003, have decided that AmeriCorps is (gasp, shudder) a jobs program.

What have these people got against national service?

Speaking of said same tax cut, too bad about the children of the working poor. Congress just announced that it's too busy to get around to restoring the child tax credit to 6.5 million low-income families (known to The Wall Street Journal as "lucky duckies" because, you see, they pay little or no income tax -- they only pay 19% of their meager incomes in other taxes).

FYI: If you put "George W. Bush" and "lies" into the Google search engine, you get 250,000 references in nine-tenths of a second.