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Madden

Sports' new arbiter of cool.

By Chris Suellentrop

Posted Thursday, Aug. 14, 2003, at 3:53 PM PT

After an unnecessarily long wait, this month Madden finally made it to Canton. Not John Madden: The coach with the highest winning percentage in NFL history and the broadcaster who's been the top analyst on three networks still hasn't been enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The other Madden. The one that, like Elvis or Madonna, needs only one name to be introduced: the pro football video game, the 14th iteration of which, Madden NFL 2004 ("Madden 2004" to most), went on sale this week. With 30 million copies sold over the course of the franchise's history, including more than 5 million of last year's version (Madden 2003), the Hall decided that America's best-selling sports game merited its own 300-square-foot display. Oh, and the museum's multiyear

marketing arrangement with EA Sports, the game's publisher, might have had something to do with it.

Why would Canton need to market itself through a video-game publisher, much less pay tribute to one of its titles? Because Madden is the new Nike, sports' official arbiter of cool. To a new generation of football players, landing on the cover of the latest version of the game is a career-defining experience, the way an enormous shoe contract, or the Wheaties box, or the cover of *Sports Illustrated* once determined which sports stars had hit the big time. "I mean this is a dream come true, for me to be on the cover of Madden NFL and be part of the game," this year's cover boy, Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, gushed to the *Sporting News*. "It's something you think about as a kid, but you don't think it will ever happen." (Vick is 23, which means he was 9 when the original John Madden Football was released for the Apple II.) Minnesota Vikings quarterback Daunte Culpepper, the 26-year-old who graced the cover of Madden 2002,* listed the experience among his top five athletic accomplishments.

For the lowliest players, simply appearing in the game (as all players on NFL rosters do) serves as a permanent validation of professional success, a digital upgrade to having your own trading card. Even if they cut you next year, they can never take away your appearance in Madden. On draft day, the college players expected to make the biggest splash on Sundays get separated from the chaff by their appearances in Madden TV ads. For fans, Madden ads are the replacement for Air Jordan and Bo Knows as the most spine-tingling commercial celebrations of sport. They feature real NFL players interspersed with computer-animated highlight clips, punctuated by Just Do It 2.0: "EA Sports: It's in the game."

Unlike PC gaming, which is still thought of as the province of solitary geeks, console gaming—meaning systems such as PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube—has become a staple of dorm rooms and locker rooms alike. Last year, only 5 percent of PC game sales were for sports titles,

but nearly 20 percent of console games sold were non-racing sports games. That's \$1 billion in sales, of which football games reaped the biggest share, as much as 40 percent. And Madden takes in anywhere from 65 percent to 85 percent of the football game market, depending on whom you ask. In the last two years, only the Grand Theft Auto games sold more copies than Madden. It's not exactly a new trend, either: In 1996, Madden was the best-selling game for the original PlayStation. Over its lifetime, the Madden games have grossed more than \$1 billion in revenues. Last year, the NFL made more money from licensing Madden to EA Sports than from any other licensed product, except for apparel.

That money doesn't only come from fans. Jacksonville Jaguars running back Fred Taylor admitted that he plays up to six hours a day of Madden during the season. "In the offseason, I'll play from 2 in the afternoon to 11 or 12 at night—every night," he told the team's hometown paper, the *Florida Times-Union*. When the Jags headed to Nashville last year to play the Tennessee Titans, Taylor went directly from the team bus to Titans cornerback Samari Rolle's house, where the two men played Madden until Taylor was required to return to his hotel.

Nor are Taylor and Rolle some sort of isolated freaks. The *Times-Union* called Madden video games "the most unifying forces" in the NFL. San Francisco 49ers quarterback Jeff Garcia has said that gaming "is the passion of about 90 percent of players." The *Sporting News* reported that Vick, the league's most electrifying player, nonetheless finds that his "ultimate rush comes from beating the snot out of a Madden NFL opponent." NFL players compete in a league-wide Madden tournament that culminates in the "Madden Bowl," an eight-man face-off held during the week preceding the Super Bowl. Superstars ranging from Tony Gonzalez to Shannon Sharpe to Terrell Owens have participated. When Jaquez Green arrived as a rookie with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the sign of his brashness was his declaration that he was going to win the team's Madden tournament.

The game's popularity among athletes extends beyond football players. Orlando Magic superstar Tracy McGrady is reputed to be a Madden mastermind. Sacramento Kings point guard Mike Bibby told *Wired* in January that he plays a Madden season every year and bragged that he won 35 of 38 games, including one 98-7 victory. Among athletes, Madden's popularity exceeds that of all other sports games, NBA player Darrell Armstrong told *Florida Today*. "I don't think too many basketball players like playing basketball games," he said.

In hindsight, sports and video games seem destined for a peanut-butter-and-chocolate-style fusion. Both are thought of mostly as the domains of adolescent males, but over time they've become more and more a part of mainstream culture. Both are associated with male camaraderie and competition. (You can even throw in a third element of youthful manhood: One year in the 1990s, 5,000 soldiers in Bosnia signed up for a Madden tourney.) And both often play the role that one EA vice president conceded to *Brandweek*: "We're sort of a direct competitor to girlfriends." The fusion of sports and video games has become a critical element of male friendship, like Strat-O-Matic was for sports geeks of a different age. The development couldn't have received more mainstream sanction than ESPN.com "Sports Guy" Bill Simmons' hilarious but touching tribute last year to the role that electronic football has played in his relationship with a friend, Gus.

In that sense, the triumph of Madden is of a piece with the triumph of gaming in youth culture and the triumph of football as the new national pastime. (In fact, the only sports game to outsell Madden internationally features the other football: FIFA Soccer, which is published in 15 languages.) But why Madden and not some other football game? Some of the game's success is due to the strength of the product: It's an action game, a role-playing game, and a serious simulation, all in one. And for good measure, it's been around long enough that it's a classic, one that creates fuzzy feelings of nostalgia while you play it. Still, although this year's version came out to rave reviews, that's not always the case.

Sometimes one of Madden's many competitors turns out to be the critics' darling.

But even when the game is weak, it can rely on the strength of John Madden. Not Madden the announcer—Madden the brand. Though his announcing style doesn't seem as fresh as it did 20 years ago, John Madden is still the world's pre-eminent football expert and evangelist. The Madden brand is so powerful that EA has virtually dropped "NFL" from the game's packaging, except in the form of a tiny logo. "Madden" and "2004" are the dominant elements on the cover, in addition to Vick's photo. As an announcer, John Madden is of no real value to the game, except as kitsch, but John Madden the football popularizer and one-man quality-control team is the perfect incarnation of his video namesake. The combination of entertainment and expertise that he brings to the booth has been superbly translated in the Madden video game, which relies on a combination of fantasy and realism for its appeal.

The game is an extension of what John Madden sells: the fun of football mixed with an understanding of the import of it. Even his "womanless nomadic existence" on the Maddencruiser bus, described last year in an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, is re-created in the throngs of men who gather in rooms, alone and in groups, to play a game for hours on end. But most of all, Madden the announcer and Madden the game rely on the same thing for their success: Everyone, even NFL football players, wants to be Michael Vick.

Wesley Clark

Is there a general in the house?

By Chris Suellentrop

Posted Wednesday, Jan. 8, 2003, at 4:35 PM PT

Tired of running as John McCain, the Democratic candidates and pre-

candidates for president have settled on a new archetype to emulate: Bill Clinton. John Edwards—the young, glib, pretty, Southern moderate—is the front-runner for the "Most Likely To Be Like Clinton" award, but there's a dark horse in the running, too: Wesley Clark. The former NATO commander, who led the 78-day bombing campaign in Kosovo, bears a superficial resemblance to the 42nd president. He's a former Rhodes scholar from Arkansas who has long been tabbed as one of his generation's brightest stars (in the military, not in politics). But the substantive parallel is the more important one. Just as Clinton restored the Democratic Party's reputation on economic policy, there's hope that Clark can lead the party out of its national-security wilderness.

Before he could do that, of course, Clark would actually have to run for president (and win the nomination, which is a long shot). But there's mounting evidence that he is going to do just that. During the fall election cycle, he met with New Hampshire Democrats and spoke to the centrist Democratic Leadership Council. In November, *Time* reported that Clark met with prominent Democrats in New York City to discuss his potential candidacy. Since then, he's been issuing carefully crafted non-denial denials about his White House ambitions, saying he has "no intention" to run, that he "hasn't raised any money," and that he doesn't "really have any plans." But according the *Des Moines Register*, he's enlisted a member of the Gore 2000 team as his top aide, he's sought advice from Donna Brazile (who's publicly urging him to run), and he's contacted top Iowa Democrats about a caucus campaign. He's now on the Associated Press's shortlist of possible candidates, and just this week he talked with Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe about his prospects.

Despite all that, a Clark candidacy isn't necessarily going to happen. As a New Hampshire Democrat told PoliticsNH.com last year, "I'd say he is running, but I don't know if he is running in 2004 or 2008 or beyond. I first met Clinton in 1979." If it did happen, what would a Clark run look like?

That's an open question. He's good-looking, but is he warm? Can he connect with a room? Can he raise money? He's a blank slate on Democratic litmus-test issues such as abortion, affirmative action, economic policy, and health care—without even getting into picayune but essential primary issues such as ethanol subsidies. He's on the record as opposing the trade embargo with Cuba, for example, but that's the sort of issue a presidential candidate can easily back off from if need be.

The centerpiece for the 58-year-old Clark's campaign would obviously be his biography, and it's an impressive one: first in his class at West Point, Rhodes scholar, wounded in Vietnam, recipient of both the Purple Heart and the Silver Star. In 1981, when Clark was a 36-year-old lieutenant colonel, the *Washington Post* magazine profiled him as "the ideal, the perfect modern officer." Since then, he continued his career as an Army "water walker," moving effortlessly up the ranks to four-star general. Just as Dr. Bill Frist gives the Republicans some moral authority on health care, a traditional GOP weakness, Gen. Clark could strengthen the Democrats' national-security hand.

One of the most compelling things about Clark is his ability to articulate—better than other Democrats, who sometimes resort to tiresome calls of "chickenhawk" or "quagmire"—the intellectual justification for what many Democrats feel in their gut: skepticism about the need for immediate war with Iraq; concern about the status of the war against al-Qaida; a preference for working with allies over going it alone; and a respect for the institutions that make up the international order that the United States built upon the ashes of World War II.

Clark is no dove. But he argues that the biggest mistake the Bush administration made in the aftermath of Sept. 11 was its refusal to conduct the war under the auspices of NATO, despite the alliance's declaration that an attack on the United States was an attack on all its member nations. As a result, Europe is not accountable for success in the war on terrorism, only the United States is. European leaders see it as George W.

Bush's war, according to Clark, because Bush has made it his war. "Not a single European election hinges on the success of the war on terrorism," Clark wrote in the September *Washington Monthly*. Clark even went so far as to employ a classic Vietnam metaphor to describe Bush's policies: "Because the Bush administration has thus far refused to engage our allies through NATO, we are fighting the war on terrorism with one hand tied behind our back."

Clark calls this "the lesson of Kosovo": If you bring allies into a war, they will want to win it as badly as you do. That's counterintuitive: The lesson most Americans took from Kosovo was that war by committee was a disaster that allowed, for example, a British commander to refuse Clark's order to take an airfield. But, as David Halberstam showed in *War in a Time of Peace*, the fact that so many leaders had staked their reputations on the Kosovo war meant that they had to win it, despite strong opposition at home: "What [losing] would do to NATO—effectively signal the end of it—and to their countries (and it was known but never said, to their own careers and place in history) was also unacceptable."

This obsession with Kosovo and the lessons that the military could learn from it call to mind another characteristic Clark shares with Clinton: He's conducting a permanent campaign for his legacy. Practically the entire preface to the paperback edition of Clark's memoir *Waging Modern War* (which was panned in ***Slate*** by Christopher Caldwell and Debra Dickerson) advances the argument that the war in Afghanistan and the fight against al-Qaida more closely resemble Kosovo than they do the Gulf War. The first strikes against Afghanistan in October 2001 "seemed so familiar and predictable, it was as if we were refighting the Kosovo operation on different ground," Clark writes. (He concedes, "Maybe I was almost alone in this feeling ...")

Like Clinton, Clark was the brightest boy in the class who finally got his shot at the biggest job of all, but it didn't represent the historic opportunity he imagined. Clark didn't return from Kosovo a war hero—instead he was

dumped as supreme allied commander by the Pentagon (which never really liked him and suspected him of being too close to Clinton). As a candidate, he wouldn't be Dwight Eisenhower or Ulysses S. Grant or Andrew Jackson or George Washington. He wouldn't even be Zachary Taylor. As that 1981 *Post* profile of the young Clark concluded, "As any military man will tell you, it takes a great war to produce a great general." Clark never got that war. Now's his chance.

Doris Kearns Goodwin

The sunny-side-up historian.

By David Greenberg

Posted Friday, March 9, 2001, at 5:30 PM PT

When we crowded around the television last summer to watch the political conventions, Doris Kearns Goodwin was there, regaling us with tales of Chicago 1968. When we tuned in last fall for the debates, Doris Kearns Goodwin was there again, recounting choice moments from the Ford-Carter matchups of 1976. As we stayed up late on Election Night waiting for a result, Goodwin recalled how reluctantly Richard Nixon had conceded defeat in 1960. As we channel-surfed during the Florida fiasco, Goodwin speculated that no matter who won, he might feel, as Lyndon Johnson did in 1963, like a pretender to the throne. And as we installed George W. Bush as president on Jan. 20, Goodwin laughed about how the unwashed hordes climbed all over the White House furniture at Andrew Jackson's 1829 "People's Inaugural."

Wherever a presidential roundtable needs an anecdote, Doris Kearns Goodwin is at the ready with a tale about Abraham Lincoln's nobility, FDR's ebullience, or John Kennedy's grace. Since 1994, when Goodwin broke into the quote-mistress racket, she's enlivened PBS and NBC news coverage with revealing gems about chief executives past. "There's this wonderful story ... " she often begins. With her easy laugh and eternally

sunny disposition, Goodwin, former Harvard professor, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, and ubiquitous "presidential historian," has become our national color commentator.

It's a label Goodwin would probably welcome. She has always approached history as an unabashed fan. In her 1997 memoir *Wait Till Next Year*, Goodwin recounts how she would listen to each afternoon's Dodger game on the radio and recount it to her father when he came home from work. To keep his attention, she taught herself how to make her inning-by-inning accounts interesting: creating a narrative, fastening on key details, building suspense, withholding the final score until the end—even modulating her voice in imitation of Dodger announcer Red Barber.

Goodwin still values the ability to spin a good yarn. In talking about Lincoln (the subject of her next book), she marveled at his "extraordinary storytelling ability, this amazing sense of humor." In her first book, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, she described LBJ as "perhaps the greatest storyteller of his age," possessed of "gestures, tone and timing" that made him a magnetic presence in informal settings. Even Hillary Clinton earns Goodwin's praise as an off-the-cuff speaker, "because her mind is so quick, and it's intelligent and she's got stories."

A critic might carp that Goodwin's anecdotes are devoid of the hardheaded analysis that separates professional historians from other media purveyors of "fun little stories" (as Katie Couric recently put it while chatting with Goodwin). Yet Goodwin has not only real credentials—a Harvard political science Ph.D. and 10 years as a professor there—but also a real approach to history concealed in her seemingly casual storytelling. The approach is derived from the psychohistory of Erik Erikson, and Goodwin deploys it in a user-friendly fashion to plumb the characters of the people who have shaped American society.

Born in 1943, Doris Kearns earned her B.A. in 1964 from Colby and

completed her Harvard doctorate by the time she was 25, simultaneously serving in the Johnson administration as a White House Fellow. An improbable series of events situated her as Johnson's confidante, and when he left Washington, he implored her to join him at his Texas ranch and help write his memoirs. Torn between a tenure-track job in Harvard's government department and direct access to a president, Goodwin chose both: teaching in Cambridge with weekend and summer excursions to Texas.

At Harvard Kearns delved into the newly trendy field of psychohistory, which uses psychoanalytic methods to understand the motives of actors in history. Studying with Erikson, she imbibed his idea that a healthy psyche depends on a proper balance in one's life of work, play, and family. Meanwhile, her frequent trips to LBJ's ranch provoked scurrilous gossip. But her intimacy with Johnson was of a different kind: Every morning she would wake at 5 a.m. and get dressed; LBJ would enter her room a half-hour later, clamber into her empty bed and pull up the covers, and unburden himself of his anxieties, dreams, and reminiscences. Kearns, playing Freud, nodded and took notes.

Kearns reclaimed much of the unused memoir material for *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, her 1976 best-selling psychoanalytic look at Johnson. The book received respectable academic reviews—no small feat given the deep animosity toward Freud—although some critics fairly faulted her for ignoring unpublished records and relying too much on LBJ's notoriously unreliable tales.

Having recently married former Kennedy and Johnson aide Richard Goodwin, given birth to a child, and proved herself as a bankable author, Goodwin abandoned a stormy tenure battle to devote herself to writing. Her next book, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, was not only another best seller but also a superior piece of scholarship. Goodwin expertly wove connections between the private relationships and public achievements of three generations of Kennedys in a way that seemed

neither reductively psychoanalytic (like so much academic fare) nor gratuitously salacious (like so many blockbusters). Eschewing psychoanalytic jargon while still probing the interplay of work, family, and leisure, Goodwin produced a serious group-character study whose psychological insights were tucked inside miniseries pageantry. The psychoformula worked well again in 1994's *No Ordinary Time*, a behind-the-scenes account of the Roosevelt White House during wartime that illuminated the residential as well as the working quarters. Again, Goodwin neither downplayed nor overplayed the principals' affairs, deceits, and foibles but presented them empathically, as a natural part of the human drama. This time she won the Pulitzer Prize and her place in the commentariat.

Despite Goodwin's televised omnipresence, she's the rare pundit who doesn't irritate. Trained to appreciate the complexity of human motives, she displays no bitterness toward the politicians she discusses. The refusal to play the scold, the absence of cynicism, the capacity for empathy—these qualities seem to grow out of Goodwin's perpetual hopefulness. In her baseball memoir, rooting for the home team served as a metaphor for the dogged cheerfulness that kept her family together after her mother's untimely death. The Dodger fans' slogan, "wait till next year," became a self-fulfilling credo that optimism would be its own reward. The same sunniness informs her punditry. John McCain's candidacy, she noted last year, could "appeal to that latent idealism in people" and might lead to "young people getting involved in politics again." Last summer, it was Al Gore, she said, who might rekindle the spirit of the 1960s, ennoble politics with a sense of purpose, and reach "a whole generation not just of young people but of all people who want us to be prouder. ... I think the readiness is there." Whether sizing up the electorate's capacity for tolerance or its willingness to make sacrifices, she always suggests that people's better angels are poised to prevail.

Occasionally, Goodwin's optimism gets the better of her. During the recent election debacle, she claimed, for example, that the United States should

"not be embarrassed at a system that actually produced finality"—in effect minimizing the harm of the election outcome and, worse, obscuring the genuinely malevolent behavior of many participants. And yet Goodwin would not be as welcome a presence in our family rooms without her relentless good cheer. Even when there is cause for gloom, Goodwin refrains from recrimination, reminding us that our politicians are less often evil than flawed human beings, limited by their own fears and insecurities. If democracy is in disrepair, our best hope is to wait till next year.

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On May 1, 1967, at a ceremony for new White House Fellows, she was asked to dance by President Johnson himself, who razzed her about her Harvard credentials. Charmed by her quick ripostes, he decided to have her work directly for him. But the next week, an article that Kearns had co-authored for the *New Republic* titled "How To Remove LBJ in 1968" hit the newsstands, and Kearns was reassigned to Willard Wirtz at the Labor Department. Yet a year later, after she'd helped Wirtz draft a speech for Johnson to deliver after Martin Luther King's assassination (which Johnson never delivered), she found herself on the White House staff after all, her office two doors down from the president's.

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Since the 1920s, historians and political scientists had looked to Freud's writings as a way to understand the motives of individuals in history; Freud himself even co-authored a biography of Woodrow Wilson. But only in the late '60s and early '70s, following in the wake of Erikson and others—and no doubt compelled by the presence of Johnson and Nixon in the White House—did scholars enthusiastically embrace psychoanalytic theory as the basis for a new direction in history and biography. In 1971, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. even hosted a conference with 40 of the world's leading historians—Jacques Barzun, Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Boorstin, Henry Steele Commager, Erikson, and others—to grapple with the ways that

Freud and his disciples were transforming the profession. In recent years, the vogue for psychohistory has faded, succumbing both to a new climate of Freud-bashing and to some psychohistorians' tendency toward crude, schematic diagnoses of their subjects. Nonetheless, it has left an indelible imprint on the way we think about the central role of "character" in the life of our political leaders.

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In 1975, as she was coming up for tenure in Harvard's government department, Kearns withdrew her 480-page scholarly manuscript from Basic Books and returned her \$20,000 advance. Instead, she contracted with Simon & Schuster—for \$150,000—to write a different book about Johnson, this one in collaboration with Richard Goodwin (whom she soon thereafter announced her plans to marry). Besides inviting a lawsuit from Basic, the news of the switch caused problems at Harvard, where her promotion to tenure had been based on the first manuscript. Some suggested that a work co-written with Goodwin could not constitute proof of the kind of scholarship needed for promotion. Eventually, she worked out a compromise with Harvard to teach half-time without tenure but with the rank of full professor for three years, with her fate at Harvard to be determined after that. Today she serves on Harvard's Board of Overseers.

Peter Jackson

The splatter flicks lurking within his *Lord of the Rings*.

By Chris Suellentrop

Posted Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2002, at 9:33 AM PT

If Woody Allen's first movies are the "early, funny ones" that only hint at what's to come, think of Peter Jackson's first movies as the early, gross ones. Fourteen years before he directed the \$300 million *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Jackson made his first feature, the aptly titled, low-budget

Bad Taste, which is filled with vomit-drinking, brain-eating, blood-spurting aliens who want to bring the "exotic new taste sensation" of human flesh to the intergalactic market. He followed *Bad Taste* with *Meet the Feebles*, a Muppets parody starring vile anthropomorphic animal puppets who miscegenate, urinate, litigate, and adulterate. Then came the horror-comedy *Dead Alive* (called *Braindead* outside the United States), which alternates between gut-turning and gut-busting and climaxes when the blood-spattered protagonist mows down—literally, with a lawn mower—a house full of zombies. Jackson's early films are often dismissed by fans of his later work, but there, lurking beneath the delirious filth, lie Frodo and the gang (or at least Jackson's vision of them), struggling to peek out.

To one degree or another, Jackson's pictures—the early and the late ones—explore the juxtaposition of normalcy and depravity. There's an innocence behind the malevolence: Much of the humor in *Dead Alive* comes from the protagonist's futile efforts to care for his decaying, undead mother. There's also a sweetness to Jackson's naive heroes, who struggle to remain calm in a world that has collapsed around them. At its heart, the *Lord of the Rings* is this same story on an epic scale. With its stark themes, good-vs.-evil imagery, and clear notions of the good guys and the bad guys, it's a zombie movie without the zombies—and it's painted with the same black-and-white palette. And in a way, Jackson's 1994 art-house hit *Heavenly Creatures* is simply an inversion of this story—it's about teenage girls who cannot stand the normal world around them, so they escape into a world of first fantastic, then actual, violence.

Like Quentin Tarantino or Robert Rodriguez, Jackson is inspired as much by film schlock as by the classics of cinema, and he makes no distinction between high art and low. Also like Rodriguez and Tarantino, the 41-year-old Jackson possesses a biography that's the Hollywood version of building a billion-dollar computer company in a Silicon Valley garage. (Unlike Tarantino and Rodriguez, there's a dash of New Zealand socialism in his story.)

As a young man, Jackson—who's from a coastal New Zealand town—aspired to become a special-effects artist, but he was turned away from a job in his country's tiny film industry. So, over a four-year period, from the age of 22 to 25, he filmed *Bad Taste* on weekends, concocting the scriptless story as he went along and casting himself and his friends to fill multiple roles. Impressed by the film's low-budget ingenuity, the New Zealand Film Commission gave Jackson some money to complete it. He quit his job and finished the movie, and the film commission took it to Cannes, where it sold to distributors in several countries. Thus, the New Zealand government began funding Jackson's splatter pictures.

Jackson can be looked at as a grown-up (and non-murderous) version of the two girls at the heart of *Heavenly Creatures*. The girls, played by Kate Winslet and Melanie Lynskey, create a fanciful, imaginative universe to escape from the dreariness of their ordinary lives. Jackson identifies with that, as well as with the girls' violent fantasies—he's said that he views making movies as a way "to get away with murder." As a writer in *Film Comment* put it, Jackson's early movies are "films the girls of *Heavenly Creatures*, in another time and perhaps gender, might've made themselves." The primary role of movies, as Jackson sees them, is escape—escape from the everyday, from the ordinary. And not just for the audience, but for the director, too: "I do what I do because I have these visions, and I have to bring them to life," Jackson told the *Dallas Observer* in 1994.

Because of his need to realize those visions in his head, Jackson sees himself as much a screenwriter as a director. But there's a disconnect between what his head conjures and what he's able to translate to the screen. In a telling admission, Jackson told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1996, "The whole thing turns rather sour once you start making the movie ... I enjoy directing, but if someone said to me I had to choose I would certainly choose writing."

But in the same way that Clint Eastwood the actor has damaged some of

the work of Clint Eastwood the director, Peter Jackson the writer can't always supply material that's worthy of his directorial talents. Particularly in his early works, but also in the disappointing major-studio release *The Frighteners*, Jackson's films sometimes come unhinged from a spectacular excess of imagination. They're intelligent and relentlessly paced, but they're ultimately unfocused and just, well, too much. Sometimes you wish Jackson would, like one of his zombie characters, stuff some of his brain back into his skull.

Jackson has become known as the "George Lucas of New Zealand" because of his special-effects wizardry, but he is actually Lucas' opposite (overlooking the fact that both men are fat and bearded). Lucas' best film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, is a Lucas-inspired story, translated to the screen by another director. Jackson's most acclaimed films, by contrast, are screen translations of someone else's story. Hence the brilliance of the online petition for Jackson to direct the final prequel in the *Star Wars* saga. Only when Jackson's imagination has been grounded in someone else's fantasy world—whether it's the diaries written by the one of the real-life murderesses of *Heavenly Creatures* or the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien—has he been able to garner the attention of more than a cult audience.

U2

Their vague majesties of rock.

By David Plotz

Updated Friday, Jan. 25, 2002, at 8:21 AM PT

For the past two years, U2 has been enjoying a miraculous run. After its disastrous '90s flirtation with irony, the Irish quartet returned to the swaddling comfort of earnestness at just the right moment. U2's 2000 album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*—a throwback to the sweeping righteous love of *The Joshua Tree* and *The Unforgettable Fire*—was

raved by critics, hit No. 1 in more than 30 countries, and continues to throw off huge singles. Since Sept. 11, their super-sincerity has been in particularly high demand. Bono orchestrated the all-star remake of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," proceeds going for Sept. 11th relief. And both "Walk On," off *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, and the old hit "One" have become Sept. 11th anthems.

In December, U2 finished one of the most profitable concert tours in rock history, was named *Spin's* Band of the Year and *Rolling Stone* readers' Artist of the Year. Next month promises more glory. The band is nominated for eight Grammys—more than any artist—and will almost certainly win a handful at the Feb. 27 ceremony. And next weekend, U2 headlines the Super Bowl halftime show, a gig for 800 million viewers.

U2 has now been good longer than any other important band in history. The Rolling Stones have been around forever, but their creative period lasted only 15 years. The Beatles imploded after a decade. U2—the same lineup of Bono, the Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen—has been making acclaimed albums since 1980's *Boy*.

The band's achievements depend on two neat tricks. First, Bono—the public face of U2—has a genius for cognitive dissonance. He is the upstairs, downstairs king of rock: He simultaneously inflates himself into the most grandiose, arrogant, self-righteous rock star and deflates himself with self-mockery and modesty. He describes U2 as reapplying for the position of "best band in the world"; calls the band "magic" and "extraordinary"; announces on *Rattle & Hum* that "All I have is a red guitar, three chords, and the truth"; and insists that "We've always been about more than music. We're about spirituality. We're about the world we live in."

But Bono counters every claim of godliness by throwing a pie in his own face. Asked by an interviewer if he is a pioneer, he declares that he is "one of the inventors of the mullet." The band mocked themselves on *The*

Simpsons. Bono cheerfully disses his own political activism: "The only thing worse than a rock star is a rock star with a conscience."

Both stances are sincere, and it is a very winning combination. The worshipful fans adore the earnest grandiosity and sing along as Bono claims transcendence. A U2 concert is one of the few places on the planet where intelligent people wave cigarette lighters without irony. In those moments when you want to believe that rock music is something bigger than entertainment—and who doesn't haven't such moments?—U2 offers exalted nourishment. *They're about more than music, man. They're about spirituality. They are the unforgettable fire!*

But U2's self-consciousness inoculates them against critics, who can find no point of attack. If you ridicule Bono for his pomposity, he will not only laugh at the joke, but will twist the knife deeper in his own chest. They are grand spectacle, but with a wink for those who are looking for one. The combination of self-important grandeur and self-deprecating humor is exceptionally rare, especially among celebrities. Many popular musicians have one or the other (almost always the self-important grandeur). The few that have both—the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Elton John are at the top of the short list—can survive greatness and don't get destroyed by their pretensions (as did humorless sorts such as the Doors, Guns N' Roses, Led Zeppelin ...).

U2's other trick is to pretend that it is a political rock band. It's true that U2 is politically promiscuous. The liner notes for *All That You Can Leave Behind*, for example, endorse Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the charity War Child, the Jubilee 2000 debt-relief campaign, freedom for Burma, and justice in Sierra Leone. And that's just one album. U2's roster of cause songs includes: "Sunday Bloody Sunday" (one of many about Ireland's troubles); "Seconds" (nuclear war); "The Unforgettable Fire" (also nuclear war); "Pride (In the Name of Love)" (Martin Luther King Jr.); "MLK" (also Martin Luther King Jr.); "Bullet the Blue Sky" (U.S. Central America policy); and so on.

It's also true that Bono is exceptionally political off stage. Click [here](#) to read about his admirable debt-relief campaign. But U2 has duped their fans into believing their music is political. Bono declares that his songs are about this or that cause, but no fan could ever know that from listening. Consider [this](#) typical passage from "Walk On," supposedly about Burmese democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi. What has it to do with Burma? I adore "Pride (In the Name of Love)" as much as anyone, but I defy anyone to explain what it teaches about Martin Luther King Jr.

U2 is perhaps the world's vaguest band. If a U2 song isn't written in the first person, it is penned to an unnamed, indistinct "you." Instead of stories or wordplay, they rely solely on fuzzy imagery. I opened the liner notes to *All That You ...* and wrote down the first three lines I read: "See the canyons broken by clouds"; "I and I in the sky"; "A man takes a rocket ship into the skies." Classic U2 haze—skies, rockets, clouds, canyons. Doesn't anyone have a name? There are never any actual people in U2 songs, never any characters. (Compare U2 to the narrative specificity of Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen.) This vagueness drains U2's lyrics of any content: It is impossible to *think* about a U2 song. "One" includes depressing lines like "We hurt each other/ Then we do it again" and "You say love is a temple. ... You ask me to enter/ But then you make me crawl"—yet this hasn't stopped fans from turning it into a Sept. 11 anthem. If it is political music, it is for the Bob Kerreys of the world, for folks who seem full of great, but totally inchoate, ideas.

U2's music—especially the Edge's soaring guitars—supports this lyrical vagueness. Their songs are gorgeous and majestic, but they produce only a single (though wonderful) emotion: a kind of lovely swelling of the soul. (For a sample of this in its purest form, listen to [this](#) snatch of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.")

This is the U2 paradox. Bono and Co. are constantly dedicating songs to specific causes, exhorting their fans to think and act in the world. Yet their

music does exactly the opposite of what it intends. Politics is the process of channeling the heart into thought and action. U2's music declares that the heart is all that matters.

sidebar

Bono has devoted his free time in the last three years to Jubilee 2000/Drop the Debt, a spiritually motivated campaign to relieve the debts of the world's poorest nations. A heartfelt Christian (in a mushy nondenominational kind of way), Bono was appalled that Africa's and Asia's basket cases spend billions to pay back loans from the IMF, World Bank, and First World governments. He was a fervent, early convert to Jubilee 2000, which portrayed debt relief as an act of biblical grace. In Christian tradition, every 50 years there is a jubilee, in which debtors can wipe the slate clean and start again.

Bono brought celebrity wattage to what he rightly calls an incredibly "unhip" issue. He frolicked with Muhammad Ali, Bob Geldof, and even the pope to bring attention to the issue. He also proved himself to be an exceptionally effective and persistent advocate in Washington. "He recognized that other people were more expert on the political strategy and the substance, but he realized he could play a unique role in giving the cause the spiritual and popular lift he thought it deserved," says Gene Sperling, who ran President Clinton's National Economic Council and met several times with Bono about debt relief.

Bono knew the issue and the numbers, and he presented the Jubilee 2000 concept to the administration in a very pragmatic way. Instead of demanding everything and fast, Sperling says, Bono pushed for realistic policy achievements, for the United States to do slightly more. He succeeded. Since 1999, Bono has made visit after visit to Washington, sucked up to the most peculiar people—Sen. Jesse Helms, Rep. John Kasich, House Majority Leader Dick Armey, Sen. Orrin Hatch, Pat Robertson—in order to promote debt relief. He was instrumental in getting

President Clinton to cancel all U.S. debts (a small sum but symbolically important) and in lobbying Congress to spend \$500 million for more substantive relief. And he is sticking with the cause. He spent this week at a debt-relief conference in Africa. In the spring he's taking Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill to Uganda to sell him on the benefits of writing off loans.

Muhammad Ali

How the Greatest became an Islamic teddy bear.

By David Plotz

Posted Friday, Feb. 8, 2002, at 7:29 AM PT

Muhammad Ali is the Dalai Lama of the post-9/11 world—the beatific sweetheart we call on to sanctify every important moment. He is always available to symbolize, well, whatever the heck you want.

The Champ, who may be the world's most famous Muslim and the world's most famous American, is certainly the world's most famous Muslim-American, and he has been using that status for the good. He made news last week by pleading, in Allah's name, for the release of kidnapped *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Hollywood executives have recruited Ali to headline a PR campaign to show Muslims that the United States opposes terrorism, not Islam. On Sept. 21, Ali was the all-star among all-stars at the 9/11 celebrity telethon—a Muslim teddy bear insisting that the religion of the prophet means peace. The December release of the biopic *Ali* prompted still more Ali worship, as did Ali's 60th birthday celebration on Jan. 17 and his lighting of the Salt Lake City Olympic torch at the start of its cross-country relay.

Since Ali's Parkinsonism was revealed about 15 years ago, the dazzling, scary, draft-dodging, anti-American, Nation-of-Islam-embracing, racial-invective-spewing, sexually promiscuous, savage, gorgeous, hilarious

boxer has been reinvented—and has reinvented himself—as a catch-all holy man, a "saintly, ethereal force," as one writer dubbed him.

He has become a full-time global do-gooder. The Greatest has taken medical supplies to Cuba and food to African children; he campaigned to cancel Third World debt; he traveled to Iraq on the eve of the Gulf War to beg Saddam Hussein to release a few American "human shields"; he negotiated a prisoner exchange between Iraq and Iran; he visited Vietnam with American families searching for MIA relatives; he has raised money for Parkinson's, muscular dystrophy, and many other diseases; and he has committed countless acts of private generosity for people in need—a few grand here, a nursing home saved there, pretty soon we're talking millions of dollars. Presidents, the United Nations, and Amnesty International, among many others, have showered him with medals.

If Ali were, say, Jesse Jackson, his indiscriminate activism would have branded him a self-aggrandizing, short-sighted opportunist undermining America. After all, Ali has cheerfully given photo ops to Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein—Hussein in a time of war. His food giveaways have been photo ops for Global Village Market, a soy meat-substitute marketing company that pays him hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to use his image. But because Ali is Ali, his favors only serve as evidence of his big heart.

Why does no one lay a finger on the Champ these days? It is the unmanning of Ali that has made him angelic. Parkinson's has stolen all that made Ali vital. It has robbed the Louisville Lip of his lip, taken the speed from his lightning feet and the strength from his mighty arms. Meanwhile, the kind of Islam he has embraced—a pillowy, warm-hearted universalist Sunnism—has diminished (at least for his white audiences) his racial identity. Ali, who once embodied the black supremacist dementia of the Nation of Islam, has become transcendently nonracial, much more an icon of Islam than of black America.

It is by *losing* all that made him threatening to the establishment—his quick tongue, his physical might, his black power—that he has been welcomed in the American living room. Emasculated, he is heroic. The less like his grand and contentious old self he is, the more he is revered. The rough edges that remain—the self-aggrandizement, the constant telling of ethnic jokes (A favorite: "What's the difference between a Jew and a canoe? A canoe tips.")—are written off as cute.

Ali also appeals so widely because he can be admired in so many contradictory ways. He is cherished as one of the 20th century's greatest talkers: the Lip, a low-comic Tennyson, the father of rap. And yet he is adored too as an inarticulate monk, whose forced silences seem eloquent and whose words are (supposedly) rich with meaning because they are so rare.

He is celebrated as one of the most brutal boxers in history, and as a peacemaker. No pantheon of black rebels is complete without him, but he is now venerated for his universalism. Leftists recall him as an anti-American dissident who fought the U.S. government over the draft, yet he has become patriotic, even jingoistic. He is at once the greatest of all entertainers and an icon of contemplative spirituality. He is admired for his joyful, fun-loving hedonism but also for his asceticism.

He symbolizes both physical perfection and the ravages of disease. (Whenever he throws a slow-motion jab these days or mumbles a word, hard men weep.) He is idolized as a champion, the three-time heavyweight king but also as a loser, whose most heroic moment was his defeat at the hands of Joe Frazier. Like the Bible, Ali can be turned to any purpose you choose. He contains multitudes.

This is why it is fruitless to try to find the essential Muhammad Ali, a task that has preoccupied writers since he was Cassius Clay. Ali is uninterested in principles or ideas—Islam, his very squishy version of it, is the only one that has stuck to him. Ali's basic philosophy is the soft touch.

Everything is a random act of kindness. A friend asks him to do it. He is touched by a particularly sweet letter from a needy fan. Someone visits his house and needs help.

There is no consistency to Ali's work, no sense that it matters beyond the moment of kindness. He doesn't follow through. Ali's good intentions often have dismal consequences. He happily handed out food to Africa's needy but seems indifferent that Global Village Market gave only 5 percent of what it claimed to charity, according to a *Montreal Gazette* investigation. He doesn't care that Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein got more out of Ali's visits than those Ali was helping. He hands out cash to folks he knows will squander it, just to make them happy.

This is where Ali and the Dalai Lama differ. The Dalai Lama, for all his happy-go-lucky spriteliness, is obsessed with a particular, very real cause. All his work and all his smiles are aimed at freeing Tibet. But the Champ has no higher goal. He revels in the adulation and appreciation of those who see him. What matters is the instant that brings joy into someone's life. Ali is a saint—a saint for a short-attention-span world.

Condoleezza Rice

George W. Bush's celebrity adviser.

By David Plotz

Posted Friday, May 12, 2000, at 12:00 AM PT

The iron rule of presidential campaigns is that aides should never overshadow their candidate—especially when he has a lightweight reputation. George W. Bush's campaign tries to hide *consigliere* Karl Rove. Bush economics adviser Michael Boskin is nearly invisible. And when was the last time you read a profile of Paul Wolfowitz, one of Bush's foreign policy honchos?

But the rule does not apply to Condoleezza Rice, W.'s other foreign policy

adviser. While almost no one has heard of Gore's foreign policy counselor Leon Fuerth, everyone knows Condi. When Al Gore delivered a major foreign policy speech last week, Bush didn't answer it himself. He dispatched Rice. Her picture, not Bush's, appeared opposite Gore in the *New York Times*. Columnists gush over her. Newspapers and network news programs profile her.

Rice is allowed to overshadow Bush because she is exotic: a black, female, conservative foreign policy expert. She stands out in Bush's army of white men, proves that his campaign is not just about good ol' boys. But her celebrity obscures how unexceptional she is. Her ideas, work, and style place her in the absolute mainstream of Republican thought. She is Brent Scowcroft in the body of a black woman.

Reporters portray Rice's ascent as more unlikely than it is, noting that she grew up in Jim Crow Alabama and lost a childhood friend in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. But Rice's family belonged to Birmingham's bourgeois elite. Her Republican father was a university administrator, and her mother taught music and science. It was understood that she would pursue a high-powered career.

Rice aspired to be a concert pianist, but at the University of Denver she found herself enthralled by an international relations class taught by Josef Korbel, Madeleine Albright's father. This led Rice into Soviet studies, where she pursued a doctorate and specialized in military affairs. Early on she decided that national interest and the balance of power, not humanitarian principles, should determine U.S. policy. In 1981, at the age of 26, she landed a professorship at Stanford.

At a 1985 conference, Rice bowled over Republican foreign policy eminence Brent Scowcroft with her tough questions and confident manner. He became the first in a series of foreign policy mentors: George Shultz and President George Bush would follow. In 1989, National Security Adviser Scowcroft hired her as his Soviet analyst. She served

three years, abetting the Soviet Union's end and Germany's reunification, meeting Mikhail Gorbachev, and impressing her bosses with her keen pragmatism and collegial disposition. After the National Security Council, she returned to Stanford and became its provost, the youngest person ever to hold the job, as well as the first woman and the first African-American.

In 1998, President George Bush brought Rice and George W. together at his Maine vacation home. They hit it off. She soon resigned as provost and became Gov. Bush's chief foreign policy adviser. Rice supervises Bush's foreign policy cabal, which includes Wolfowitz, Robert Zoellick, and Richard Perle. (Even Gore advisers concede she has assembled "a pretty good team.") Rice polishes Bush's speeches, advises him on policy specifics, serves as his sounding board.

Rice rejects the notion that she is the brains behind Bush's foreign policy. She says that Bush has "good instincts" about the subject, and she argues that even experts would have flunked the international relations pop quizzes he tanked in the fall. Still, it's easy to see her fingerprints on his statements. She wrote an article for the January/February *Foreign Affairs* outlining many of Bush's themes. Blasting the Clinton administration for its bobbing, purposeless foreign policy, she insisted that America pursue its "national interest" rather than squishy notions of humanitarianism and international law. The United States should treat China and Russia as competitors rather than partners, strengthen the military but use it less, and firm our ties to regional allies such as Korea and Japan, she wrote. We should avoid humanitarian interventions unless—and this is a big wiggle—there is good reason for them. We should push free trade and economic liberalization everywhere—especially China—because this invariably leads to political liberalization. We should deploy a national missile defense and scrap treaties, such as the ABM treaty, that impede the national interest. Above all, the United States must be more "resolute" and certain in its aims.

Her philosophy is not the cold warrior ethos she was raised on. According to friend and NSC colleague Philip Zelikow, who co-authored a book on German reunification with Rice, the end of the Cold War helped open her thinking. Like many analysts of her generation, she focuses more on economics, conceives of the world in multipolar rather than bipolar terms, frets more about rogue states, and hews less to ideology.

Republicans who favor a values-laden foreign policy criticize Rice for her willingness to work with undemocratic regimes, notably China. Republican isolationists suspect she is too willing to send American troops overseas. In short, she occupies the solid middle of the Republican foreign policy spectrum. (Rice's and Bush's views differ surprisingly little from Gore's. All support the Kosovo intervention, trade with China, engagement with Russia, and the primacy of Israel's security in the Middle East. "What are they going to do differently?" asks Michael McFaul, a Stanford colleague of Rice's who advises Gore on foreign policy. Jacob Weisberg noted the similarity of Bush's and Gore's foreign policies in this recent "[Ballot Box](#).")

What is most remarkable about Rice's work for Bush is not her advice—he could hear much the same thing from Perle or Richard Cheney or others—but her friendship. She really likes Bush, and he seems to reciprocate. They share deep religious faith—both are evangelical Protestants. Both are sports fans and exercise fanatics: During one early meeting, Bush consulted with Rice while she ran on a treadmill. Both are loose and funny but capable of hardheaded pragmatism when it's required. "We have very similar personalities," she says.

Some Rice admirers tout her for secretary of defense in a Bush administration, others for secretary of state. But many peg her as national security adviser. That, after all, is the foreign policymaker who works most directly with the president. "She would be at the center and close to Bush," says a friend of hers. "Bush would feel more comfortable in the White House with her around."

Matt Groening

When reality grows cartoonlike, a realist cartoons.

By A.O. Scott

Posted Saturday, April 10, 1999, at 12:30 AM PT

I have before me the current issue of *The Comics Journal*, which features a list of the 100 greatest comics of the century, from *Prince Valiant* at the bottom to *Pogo*, *Peanuts*, and *Krazy Kat* at the top, with room for everyone from R. Crumb to Captain Marvel in between. There is no place in it, however, for Matt Groening's *Life in Hell*. Groening's friend Lynda Barry (whose work often shows up next to his in the pages of alternative weeklies across the land) gets the nod for her brilliant *Ernie Pook's Comeek* (No. 74). Up-and-coming comics superstar Ben Katchor's *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer* checks in at No. 56. But those anxious bunnies Binky and Bongo and their sidekicks, the deadpan fez wearers Akbar and Jeff, are conspicuous (to me, anyway) in their absence.

This is a shame, since Groening, better known as the creator of *The Simpsons*, and now of the much-hyped *Futurama*, is also an important figure in the world of pen-and-ink serial cartooning. He is the link between Jules Feiffer (who earns two spots on *The Comics Journal's* list) and *Dilbert* (who earns none). He is also part of the explosion of brilliant graphic work that began in the early 1980s and has so far produced an array of permanent contributions to American culture---the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, to name only a few. Unlike these artists, Groening is not interested in rigorous draftsmanship or extended narration, but he is, like them (and like Barry and Katchor), committed to using cartoons as a way of addressing reality. *Life in Hell* hits us where we live: under the thumb of well-meaning, rational, but ultimately psychotic and abusive authority. Hell is other bunnies--bosses, parents, teachers, co-workers, boyfriends, girlfriends. We (I mean all us bunnies, fez wearers, and miscellaneous

snaggletoothed, pop-eyed, four-fingered creatures) seem hard-wired for sadomasochism. Even the exuberant, indistinguishable lovers Akbar and Jeff spend panel after panel devising new ways to baffle, dominate, and mind-fuck each other.

To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau: When reality becomes cartoonlike, the only place for a realist is in cartooning. It's no accident that the rise of serious comics (or "graphic novels" as some publishers chose to call them) came at a moment when American fiction was relatively moribund. For its part, *The Simpsons* arrived at what was a relatively bad period for Hollywood movies and was part of what will be remembered as an explosion of inventive network television programming: *thirtysomething*, *Roseanne*, *My So-Called Life*, *Twin Peaks* and, of course, *Seinfeld*.

The Simpsons, now midway through its 10th season, has outlasted them all. It began as a series of fill-in segments for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. (Oh, for the Fox network of yesteryear! Of *21 Jump Street* and Shannen Doherty-era *90210*, of *Alien Nation* and *Roc*! Where have you gone, Keenen Ivory Wayans?) These crudely drawn mini-episodes were like Raymond Carver stories optioned by Hanna-Barbera. They featured the grind and humiliation of lower-middle-class family life, and they centered not on the children Bart, Lisa, and Maggie but on the beleaguered patriarch Homer. The early Homer was hardly the sweet-natured oaf who quickly replaced Bill Cosby and Ronald Reagan as America's favorite dad. His voice was growlier, his temper quicker, and his shaky masculine pride always on the line. The first bit I recall seeing involved Homer falling for the aggressive sales pitch of an RV salesman, and his willingness to bury his family under crushing debt in order to look like a big shot in the salesman's eyes, and theirs. (The current Homer, in contrast, is a creature so utterly without pride as to qualify for a kind of sainthood.)

In early 1990, Fox, a fledgling outfit with nothing to lose, put the half-hour *Simpsons* in its Thursday, 8 p.m. slot, up against *The Cosby Show*, then the No. 1 program in America. The upstart did not just so much challenge

Cosby as envelop it: In perhaps the most sustained of the winking pop-culture references for which it has become famous (and on which it came to depend rather too heavily as time went on), *The Simpsons* soon featured an avuncular African-American physician with a penchant for multicolored sweaters.

The Simpsons is justly celebrated for the density of its cultural allusions and the rich detail of its visuals. The best episodes project two dimensions into three better than any animation since Disney's features of the 1940s or the great Chuck Jones Merrie Melodie shorts for Warner Bros. But the show's real achievement is in its characters, a range of comic types as vivid as any in Dickens or Shakespeare. While Bart is the franchise and Lisa the feminist-intellectual icon, the heart of *The Simpsons* is the extraordinary marriage of Homer and Marge, a marriage that has had its tests (Remember that slinky French bowling instructor? That country-and-western diva? The six-foot hero sandwich? The nervous breakdown on the freeway?), but has endured since the end of the disco era. When George Bush sneered during the 1992 campaign that America needed more families like the Waltons and fewer like the Simpsons, you knew it was over for him--and not only because he seemed to be wishing for an end to electricity and indoor plumbing. The Simpsons are our truest, best selves: stupid--maybe; lazy--you bet; suspicious of authority--always; willing to do anything about it--not really; but above all, loyal to our spouses, our children, our little sisters, our friends, our hometowns, our bad haircuts, and our favorite brand of beer. *The Simpsons* may be hip and ironic, but unlike, say, *South Park* or *Ren & Stimpy*, it has never been cynical.

Its success resulted from the unlikely collusion between Groening, a left-wing populist (and self-described hippie) from the Pacific Northwest, and Rupert Murdoch, a right-wing populist from Australia. While Groening has always insisted on (and been granted) freedom from network interference, his show is still a creature of contradictions. It pokes endless fun at the corporatization of all aspects of life (think of Duff Gardens, a mind-

numbing, totalitarian theme park; or the robotic Schwarzenegger clone known as McBain; or Malibu Stacy, the Barbie-like doll Lisa Simpson lives for) even as its characters have become among the most recognizable icons of corporate culture. This January, the spiky hair and bulging eyes of Bart Simpson mysteriously found their way into a photograph of soldiers patrolling a street in Hebron that accompanied a *New York Times Magazine* essay by Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. An "Editor's Note" the following week explained that the photographer in question signs all his pictures by holding a Bart Simpson mask up to his lens--and that the editors erroneously assumed that the mask had been held by a passing Palestinian child.

"As much as I love the *Simpsons* show," Groening recently told *Wired* magazine, "I also love the *Simpsons* figurines. To me the figurines are part of the creative product." Groening's willing, if somewhat ironic, embrace of the marketing bonanza his creation has unleashed may have cost him his rightful spot in the *The Comics Journal's* highbrow/subculture pantheon. I'm sure he's not as upset about it as I am.

In the decade since its debut, *The Simpsons* has spawned a raft of imitators and has launched a boom in prime-time animation. Some of the products of this boom have been unsurprisingly dreadful (Remember *The Critic*? *Duckman*?). But others have been pretty good--the tragically misunderstood *Beavis and Butt-head*, for instance, and its creator's subsequent *King of the Hill*. And now Fox, ever eager to flog its winning formulas to the point of exhaustion, has come up with *The Family Guy*, *The PJs*, and Groening's own *Futurama*. The critics have been generous to *Futurama*, confident that it will pick up steam as it goes along. I'm not so sure. Visually, it's stunning. The screen is packed with puns for the eye and teasers for the brain. But the writing is slow and stilted, and the situations already seem tired and didactic. This week's episode was as cuddly as an episode of *Full House*, and the previous one, in which it's discovered that the moon has become a vulgar tourist trap, seemed recycled from *Simpsons* outtakes right down to the "Whalers on the

Moon" singing panorama. Perhaps *Futurama* will pick up. I make no predictions.

Except one. A thousand years from now, if robot historians want to know what life was really like in late-20th-century America, they will look to *Life in Hell* and *The Simpsons*. No, there were no talking rabbits, and human hair was not sculpted into yellow spikes or blue pylons (well, not that often anyway). But everything else is pretty much accurate.

Winnie-the-Pooh

The bear belongs to America.

By David Plotz

Posted Sunday, Feb. 15, 1998, at 12:30 AM PT

The British, whose two principal hobbies seem to be slobbering over small animals and waxing nostalgic about their past, found a way to do both last week. They demanded the repatriation of Winnie-the-Pooh.

The sideshow to last week's Bill Clinton-Tony Blair summit, the Pooh flap was touched off when British MP Gwyneth Dunwoody, a Pol of Very Little Brain, visited the five original Pooh dolls displayed in the New York Public Library. Dunwoody beseeched the United States to liberate the "Pooh Five" from their "glass prison" and send them home. The dolls, she said, were America's Elgin marbles, a cultural treasure stolen from overseas.

Within 48 hours, Pooh had made the front page of the *New York Post*; New York Gov. George Pataki had told Dunwoody to buzz off; Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., had introduced a congressional resolution declaring that the "Brits have their head in a honey jar if they think they are taking Pooh out of New York City"; Mayor Rudy Giuliani had brought Pooh a jar of honey and praised him as "the very best in immigration"; and Clinton spokesman Michael McCurry had called the idea of Pooh's repatriation

"unbearable." (This was, believe it or not, one of the week's better puns.) Blair, recognizing that discretion is the better part of absurdity, relented and withdrew Dunwoody's demand. The "special relationship" between the United States and the United Kingdom was saved.

There's no doubt that the law favors the American side in the Pooh flap. Pooh and friends have been here since 1947, when author A.A. Milne loaned them to his American publisher, E.P. Dutton, for a publicity tour. When Milne died in 1956, Dutton bought the dolls from his estate for \$2,500. *Pooh* hero/Milne son Christopher Robin Milne expressed his satisfaction with Pooh's American home before his own death in 1995.

The law favors the Americans, but does justice? To whom does Winnie-the-Pooh belong? Who is Winnie-the-Pooh, really?

There are two camps in the Pooh feud: nativist and internationalist. The nativist (Dunwoody) logic: Pooh was born in Britain in 1926, his creator A.A. Milne was British, his owner Christopher Robin was British, he was raised in Britain's Hundred Acre Wood, and he played Poohsticks in a British river. Ergo, Pooh is an Englishman (Englishbear, whatever). Americans counter with an internationalist view: Pooh is a "citizen of the world," as Giuliani put it. Hundred Acre Wood is not identifiably British. What kind of English forest has a wild kangaroo *and* a tiger? Besides, say the internationalists, Milne's language is universally charming ("a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness"), and his moral lessons are universally applicable (if you visit a friend and gorge yourself on honey, you are likely to end up stuck in his doorway for a week while he uses your legs as a towel rack--how true!).

But there is a third view of Pooh: that he is neither British nor global. He is American. If you could summarize what an American is (or a Brit's idea of what an American is), it would be Pooh. He is a Very American Sort of Bear, a bear without a single English quality. Like the pioneers of the Old West, Pooh is endlessly greedy, and he is cunning in pursuit of that greed.

Winnie-the-Pooh is, at bottom, the story of Pooh's quest for honey (honey = money?). His appetite cannot be sated. He eats Rabbit's honey; he eats the honey meant for the Heffalump trap; he eats the honey that is Eeyore's birthday present; he tries to eat a beehive's honey. Pooh is naive and ignorant: He spells poorly ("honey" is "hunny"), and he is impressed by the pretentious wisdom of Owl. But when it comes to avarice, Pooh has a native intelligence. He can't reach a beehive by climbing, so he jury-rigs a balloon to raid the hive from the air. Owl and Eeyore, the two most obviously British characters, are talkers. Pooh is a doer.

Pooh's greed is tempered by an all-American friendliness. Of Britain's most memorable children's-book characters--Toad and Badger in *The Wind in the Willows*, Aslan in the "Narnia" books, Alice and the Mad Hatter in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*--Pooh is by far the sunniest. There is no dark side to Pooh, no complicated European soul. Pooh is guileless, blithe, good-natured, democratic. He is the best friend to all. (There is also a brash self-confidence to Pooh: He composes songs of praise to himself that would have done Whitman proud.)

Pooh's world, too, is far more American than British. Hundred Acre Wood resembles an idealized vision of America's pioneer past, a wild, empty land populated by a few hardy pioneers who band together when danger threatens (Heffalumps!).

And Pooh belongs to America for economic reasons as well as literary ones. Where would he be today without American commercial know-how? For the first 50 years of his life, Pooh was a modest franchise--a pair of books that sold fairly well to British and American parents. America rescued him from minor cult status and gave him to the world (at a not-insignificant profit). Pooh has now sold more than 20 million books, most of them in the United States. Penguin, which holds the U.S. copyright on the original Pooh books, has published black-and-white Pooh books, color Pooh books, miniature Pooh "storybooks," Pooh in Latin (*Winnie ille Pu*), Pooh for New Agers (*The Tao of Pooh* and its companion volume, *The Te*

of *Piglet*), and even Pooh for managers.

Disney, which owns Pooh's merchandising rights, has done even more to spread his gospel. Disney has produced four short animated features, one of which won an Academy Award. It has also aired more than 80 episodes of *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. "Disney Pooh" horrifies Pooh traditionalists ("abhorrent," says one young mother I know). He wears a red jacket ("Classic Pooh" was naked) and speaks with an American accent. He fights movie monsters, sings in a musical Western, and celebrates Thanksgiving (*Thanksgiving?*). But Disney Pooh reaches the world. Pooh videos from Disney have sold nearly 20 million copies, and Disney Pooh decorates books, blankets, albums, bedding, slippers, calendars, backpacks, and cookie jars sold to impressionable children everywhere. There are even Disney Pooh CD-ROMs. When Pooh is on CD-ROM, you know he really has it made. And you know he really is American.

sidebar

Pooh lives in a climate-controlled glass case with Tigger, Piglet, Kanga, and Eeyore. The five toys used to belong to author A.A. Milne's son Christopher Robin and were the inspirations for *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*. Where is Roo, you ask? When he was a child, Christopher Robin lost him in an apple orchard. That was a sad day in the Milne home.

sidebar

After rescuing Piglet from drowning, Pooh sings:

"3 Cheers for Pooh! (*For Who?*) For Pooh-- (*Why what did he do?*) I thought you knew; He saved his friend from a wetting! 3 Cheers for Bear!"