Between Iraq and a Hard Place
Approximately 2003 reasons to be grateful it's almost December 31

By Dave Barry

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It was the Year of the Troubling Question.

The most troubling one was: What the heck happened to all those weapons of mass destruction that were supposed to be in Iraq? Apparently there was an intelligence mix-up. As CIA Director George Tenet noted recently, "Our thinking now is that the weapons of mass destruction might actually be in that other one, whaddyacallit, Iran. Or Michigan. We're pretty sure the letter 'i' is involved."

Some other troubling questions from 2003 were:

* If Californians hated Gray Davis so much, why did they elect him governor twice? Did Gray have photos of the entire California electorate naked? Can we see them?

* Why did Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck -- whose sole achievement in 2003 was to co-star in "Gigli," a film so bad it was used to torture suspected terrorists -- receive more media attention than the entire continent of Asia, and nearly as much as Kobe Bryant?

* Who's watching all these "reality" TV shows? Nobody admits to watching them; everybody agrees they're even stupider than those infomercials wherein Ron Popeil spends 30 minutes liquefying vegetables to the rapturous delight of a live, if half-witted, audience. And yet "reality" shows keep getting ratings. Who are the viewers? Have houseplants learned to operate remote controls?

* Can young people wear their pants any lower? Their waistbands are now at approximately knee level. Where will this trend end? The shins? The feet? Will young people eventually detach themselves from their pants altogether and just drag them along behind, connected to their ankles by a belt?

We don't know the answers to any of these questions. All we know is that 2003 is finally, we hope, over. But before we move on, let's put our heads between our knees and take one last look back at this remarkable year, which started, as is so often the case, with . . .

JANUARY

. . . which begins with traditional New Year's Day celebrations all over the world, except at the Central Intelligence Agency, which, acting on what it believes to be accurate information, observes Thanksgiving.

In college football, the University of Miami Hurricanes defeat Ohio State in the Fiesta Bowl and reign as national champions for roughly a week, at the end of which a Fiesta Bowl official -- a man with the reaction time of a sequoia, who has been standing in the end zone the whole time, reflecting on the final play -- throws a penalty flag, thus giving the game to Ohio State in what future legal scholars will deem the most flagrant miscarriage of justice in human history. Not that we Miami fans are still bitter.

On a brighter note, President Bush announces a plan to boost the sagging U.S. economy via a two-pronged stimulus package consisting of (1) visiting Crawford, Tex., and (2) prayer.
Meanwhile, a claim by the Raelians, a UFO cult, that they have produced a human clone baby named Eve is increasingly viewed with skepticism by scientists. "Having looked at their so-called evidence," state the scientists, "we strongly suspect that the clone baby is actually named Rachel."

In medical news, researchers studying heart attack victims announce that a person who drinks a glass or two of wine or beer is, quote, "significantly more likely to do the macarena."

World tension mounts when North Korea announces that it is withdrawing from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, on the grounds that it's really hard to pronounce "proliferation." Faced with clear-cut evidence that the North Koreans are actively developing weapons of mass destruction, President Bush vows to determine whether North Korea "is located anywhere near Iraq."

In politics, Rep. Harold Farnwimble of Ohio becomes the only Democratic member of Congress to formally declare that he is not running for president. He immediately surges ahead in the polls.

On the technological front, a fast-spreading "worm" virus cripples Internet e-mail traffic, briefly bringing the international penis-enlargement industry to . . . well, to its knees.

In pro football, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers defeat the heavily favored Oakland Raiders and win the Super Bowl, despite the objections of Fiesta Bowl officials who want to award the victory to Ohio State.

Speaking of setbacks, in . . .

FEBRUARY

. . . U.S. coalition-building efforts are dealt a severe blow when France announces that it will not participate in the impending Iraq invasion, a decision that, in the words of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, "could seriously impair our ability to surrender."

American citizens show their disdain for all things French by boycotting French wine, calling french fries "freedom fries," and taking showers.

Elsewhere in the War on Terror, the Department of Homeland Security urges Americans to stock up on food, water, flashlights, duct tape and plastic sheeting. Within hours, al Qaeda surrenders, stating: "We cannot fight flashlights and duct tape."

Meanwhile, tension between the United States and North Korea continues to mount as North Korea, in what the White House calls "a deliberate act of provocation," uses nuclear missiles to destroy Columbus, Ohio. A visibly angry President Bush warns the North Koreans that they "better not give any of those missiles to Iraq."

On the economic front, the struggling airline industry undergoes another round of cost-cutting, highlighted by United Airlines' announcement that, beginning in March, passengers on international flights "will have to eat each other."

On Valentine's Day, millions of men give millions of women flowers, cards and candy as a heartfelt expression of the emotion that also motivates men to observe anniversaries and birthdays: fear.

In entertainment news, Rachel the imaginary UFO cult baby is signed to do a "reality" TV show. In yet another indication of the nation's worsening obesity crisis, a new medical study concludes that Americans are now so fat that "they are causing tides."

Late in the month, a massive "Storm of the Century" blizzard batters the Northeast with icy blasts and holds the region in its wintry grip, blanketing New England with white stuff as emergency crews struggle to keep the news media supplied with weather cliches.

And things only get worse in . . .

MARCH

. . . when North Korean troops invade Oregon, prompting a grim-faced President Bush to declare that "time is running out for the Iraqi regime."
But the United States continues to have trouble getting other nations to join the coalition, and is forced to bribe Turkey by giving the Turkish government an "economic aid package" consisting of $37 billion in cash, plus unlimited nighttime and weekend minutes, plus what is described as a "hard-to-get video" of Britney Spears. With Turkey onboard, the coalition now consists of seven nations, assuming you count Guam, Puerto Rico and Staten Island as nations.

As it becomes clear that an Iraqi invasion is imminent and war is at hand, Democrats in Congress, setting aside partisan politics, pledge "total, unwavering and unconditional support" for the president and commander in chief, "unless anything bad happens."

While all this is going on, Osama bin Laden attempts to surrender to U.S. authorities, but is told to come back later, as everybody is busy.

Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein, in a last-ditch effort to stay in power, declares that he has been the victim of "identity theft," and somebody else, using his name and Social Security number, has actually been running Iraq for the past two decades. In response, the United Nations Security Council, meeting in emergency session, votes, 15-0, to continue patronizing expensive Manhattan restaurants.

But it is too little, too late. On March 19, coalition forces attack Iraq; within days they control most of the southern part of the country and have taken many prisoners, including two of the three known Dixie Chicks. They do not immediately uncover any weapons of mass destruction, but do find a warehouse containing a large quantity of what is believed to be refined sugar, which CIA intelligence analysts note "is a leading cause of tooth decay."

In non-war news:

* An outbreak of the SARS virus in Asia is blamed for dozens of deaths, many of them travel agents committing suicide.

* The Academy Awards are held, with the Oscar for best picture going to "Chicago," only to be taken away by a Fiesta Bowl official and awarded to Ohio State.

And speaking of drama, in . . .

APRIL

. . . coalition forces capture Baghdad, and hopes soar for a quick resolution to the conflict when a huge statue of Hussein is toppled before a cheering Iraqi crowd. But these hopes are quickly dashed when, tragically, the statue fails to land on Geraldo.

Hussein himself is nowhere to be found, though he does release a videotape announcing plans to take his career "in a new direction," possibly including a "reality" TV show called "Queer Eye for a Dictator Guy," in which he will undergo a makeover by five gay men, who will then be executed.

On the Weapons of Mass Destruction front, coalition troops discover three barrels of lard, described by U.S. intelligence sources as "a heart attack waiting to happen."

As the war grinds on, some welcome moments of comic relief are provided by the Iraqi information minister, Mohammed Saeed Sahhaf, who becomes an international laughingstock by continuing to insist, despite overwhelming evidence, that the Americans are being routed. He is quickly hired as a Fiesta Bowl official.

In other news:

* The Masters golf tournament goes smoothly despite a mass protest by an estimated four people against Augusta National's membership policy, defended by a person named "Hootie," of accepting only deceased males. "Someday, we may decide to accept women," says Hootie. "But only if they are males."

* The New York Times suffers a credibility crisis when numerous stories by reporter Jayson Blair are found to contain inaccuracies, such as the assertion, in a story about the Washington-area sniper case, that the sun is carried across the sky by a giant turtle. ("In fact," notes the Times, "it is the moon.") Blair, thoroughly disgraced, is forced to accept a six-figure book contract.
* The Georgia legislature, finally yielding to intense pressure to eliminate a controversial symbol of the Old South, votes, after passionate
debate, to abolish slavery.

* American Airlines, in a move to cut labor costs, replaces some pilots with baggage handlers, but stresses that this change applies "only to
daytime flights."

* North Korean troops capture Wisconsin.

But things brighten a bit in . . .

MAY

. . . when President Bush lands on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln off the coast of California and declares, to a crowd of sailors, that
major combat has ended. The jubilation is dampered somewhat when, moments after the president's plane departs, the carrier is severely
damaged by a car bomb.

Meanwhile, in Iraq itself, looting continues to be a problem, as dramatized by the discovery that both the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are
missing. On a more positive note, efforts to establish a Western-style democracy in Iraq move forward with the arrival, as consultants, of
Florida election officials. Within hours the nation plunges back into chaos.

Elsewhere abroad, Chinese health authorities, stung by accusations that they have been slow in reacting to the SARS virus, announce that they
will execute anybody who gets sick.

In domestic news, Congress enacts massive tax cuts in an effort to, in the words of a Republican leader, "see if we can push the deficit over the
skillion-dollar mark." The major Democratic presidential candidates denounce the cuts and vow to repeal them, because promising to increase
taxes is a proven vote-winner on the planet they come from, namely, Planet Walter Mondale.

Florida becomes the most recent state to ban smoking in restaurants. California, determined to stay ahead of the trend, bans eating in
restaurants.

In an inspiring story of courage, hiker Aron Ralston, trapped in a remote Utah canyon, frees himself by amputating his own right arm.
Somehow he manages to fashion a tourniquet and hike back to civilization, where he is slapped with a $17 million negligence lawsuit by
lawyers representing the arm.

North Korean troops occupy the Washington Monument.

In sports, golfer Annika Sorenstam competes in a PGA tournament, setting off a major round of diaper-changing among the membership of
Augusta National. Meanwhile, Nike signs a $90 million endorsement deal with 18-year-old basketball player and Hummer owner LeBron
James Inc. To pay for this, Nike raises the average price of a pair of its sneakers to $385, which includes $1.52 for materials, and 17 cents for
labor.

In yet another sign of declining national educational standards, a 12-year-old Vermont girl wins the National Spelling Bee in Washington by
spelling "horse." She actually spells it "h-o-r-s," but the judges rule that this is "close enough."

In entertainment news, CNN switches to a new format that consists entirely of Larry King talking to former prosecutors about Laci Peterson.

Speaking of upbeat, in . . .

JUNE

. . . hopes for peace in the Mideast soar when President Bush meets with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in a landmark summit, which goes
really well until gunfire erupts over the seating arrangements.
Meanwhile, a political controversy brews over a little-noticed statement in the president's January State of the Union address, in which he asserted that Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, was "located right next to Connecticut." The CIA heatedly denies responsibility for the error, noting, "We clearly said Delaware."

On the crime front, Martha Stewart is indicted on charges of securities fraud and obstruction of justice. "Also," states a federal prosecutor, "we believe that some of her casseroles contained human body parts."

Speaking of unhealthy: An outbreak of monkey pox (really) forces federal authorities to ban the sale of, among other animals, Gambian giant pouched rats. It is not immediately clear why anybody would want a giant pouched rat, or why such a person would not deserve to get a disease.

On the literary front, the blockbuster bestseller of the year is the long-awaited fifth Harry Potter book, Harry Potter Reaches Puberty and Starts Taking Really Long Showers. Another hot seller is Sen. Hillary Clinton's new book, I Can't Help It if I'm a Saint, in which, with great candor and openness, her ghostwriter reveals the most intimate details of Sen. Clinton's life, except the parts that might be interesting, which fall within Sen. Clinton's Zone of Privacy. Promoting her book on a nationwide, multi-city Zone of Privacy Tour, Sen. Clinton repeatedly denies that she plans to run for president, insisting that she is totally dedicated to "representing my constituents in, you know, that state."

North Korean troops, growing desperate for attention, announce plans to appear in a new "reality" TV show, tentatively titled "We Have Conquered Your Nation, Capitalist Scum," but it is canceled when network executives find out that nobody involved is blond.

The downward spiral continues in . . .

JULY

. . . when President Bush goes to Africa for a five-day visit that goes quite well, considering the fact that the president, relying on U.S. intelligence reports, is under the impression he is touring Switzerland. Once the confusion is straightened out, the president has what the White House describes as "a very constructive meeting" with "a very influential group" of elephants.

Meanwhile, hopes for democracy dim in Iraq when the postwar governing council of Iraqi leaders, holding its first meeting, votes to hire James Carville. On a positive note, U.S. forces kill Uday and Qusay Hussein, who are immediately signed to appear on a "reality" TV show called "Who Wants to Take a Gander at the Bodies of Two Slimeball Dictator's Sons?"

In the Caribbean, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepts a group of Cubans attempting to travel from Cuba to Florida in a 1951 Chevrolet pickup truck. The Coast Guard arrests the Cubans and sinks the truck after a computer check shows that it has an expired registration. "Also," states the Coast Guard, "they were not signaling lane changes."

Domestically, the big news is in California, where -- in a catastrophe long predicted by geologists -- a massive, violent tectonic shift opens a huge fault in the earth's crust, releasing a vast mutant, swarming horde of gubernatorial candidates. "It's terrible!" reports one rescue worker. "There's porn stars, washed-out actors, strippers, fanatics, lunatics and somebody named 'Cruz Bustamante.'" Federal troops are ordered into the state, where they immediately become stuck in traffic.

Disney World, in what turns out to be a hugely successful promotion, holds the first-ever "North Korean Troops Day."

In sports, Lance Armstrong wins a record-tying fifth Tour de France and celebrates, as is traditional, by having his bicycle seat surgically removed from his butt.

In entertainment news, CNN, concerned about flagging viewer interest in the Laci Peterson format, switches to "All Kobe, All the Time." The music industry, in what is seen as a last-ditch effort to halt the sharing of music files on the Internet, asks a federal judge to issue an injunction against "the possession or use of electricity."

Speaking of which, the big domestic story in . . .

AUGUST
... begins on a quiet weekday morning in rural northern Ohio, where 83-year-old widow Eileen Freemonkle decides that, for a change, she will put two Pop-Tarts into her toaster, instead of her usual one. This rogue action -- never anticipated by the designers of the nation's electrical power grid -- sets off a chain of events that ultimately blacks out the entire Northeast. As rescue crews work overtime trying to keep people in the affected areas supplied with news about the developing Kobe Bryant situation, Congress swings into emergency action; within hours, Democrats and Republicans have issued literally hundreds of press releases blaming each other. Power is finally restored several days later by power company workers, aided by bored North Korean troops.

In Iraq, U.S. troops capture a cousin of Saddam Hussein known as "Chemical Ali"; a search of his person fails to uncover any weapons of mass destruction, but he is carrying a Bic pen that, as CIA analysts are quick to note, "could poke out somebody's eye."

Mars makes its closest approach to Earth in human history, prompting Arnold Schwarzenegger to declare, to Jay Leno, that he is running for governor of California. In other political news, Howard Dean emerges as the leading Democratic presidential candidate, thanks to a novel Internet fundraising strategy in which he pretends to be a wealthy Nigerian businessman.

In a controversial ruling, a federal court orders a monument depicting the Ten Commandments removed from the Alabama Supreme Court building after an audit shows that it actually has 14 commandments, including two that say "Roll Tide!" In other religious news, Episcopal Church leaders, in a highly controversial decision following bitter debate, confirm the church's first openly Jewish bishop.

In the arts, Madonna, demonstrating the courage, creativity and talent that have made her name synonymous with the word "Madonna," kisses Britney Spears. This results in a worldwide tidal wave of publicity, followed by the emergence, on both performers, of lip sores.

And speaking of alarming, in...

SEPTEMBER

... Palestinian and Israeli leaders finally recover the Road Map to Peace, only to discover that, while they were looking for it, the Lug Nuts of Mutual Interest came off the Front Left Wheel of Accommodation, causing the Sport Utility Vehicle of Progress to crash into the Ditch of Despair.

Meanwhile, President Bush goes before the U.N. General Assembly to ask for help in rebuilding Iraq. After enjoying a hearty international laugh, everyone adjourns for dinner at upscale Manhattan restaurants.

In domestic politics, Gen. Wesley Clark joins the crowded field of Democratic contenders and declares that, if he is elected president, his first official act will be "to actually register as a Democrat." In other political news, the California governor race is temporarily thrown into disarray when residents of the other 49 states file a class-action lawsuit demanding the right to vote in the recall election, on the grounds that "it's on TV all the time."

But the hot political news is a huge scandal that erupts in Washington after conservative columnist Robert Novak writes a column in which he reveals that the wife of a guy who was critical of the Bush administration's Iraqi policy and went to Africa on a fact-finding mission is in fact a CIA agent (the wife is, we mean), which he (Novak) allegedly was improperly told by a high-level White House source, who some people allege is Karl Rove, although he (Rove) (also Novak) heatedly denies this, and if you think this scandal is incomprehensible, you are in the vast human majority, but people in Washington are still so excited about it that they have to change their underwear hourly.

Meanwhile, Hurricane Isabel makes landfall on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, forcing the evacuation of 23,000 North Korean troops.

In the War on Telemarketing, a federal judge in Oklahoma blocks the implementation of the federal Do Not Call list on the grounds that it is unconstitutional. Hours later, he reverses the ruling on the grounds that his house is surrounded by people with torches.

There is another popular uprising in...

OCTOBER

... when the people of California, by a large majority, vote to send incumbent governor Gray Davis back to his pod. They replace him with Arnold Schwarzenegger, who wins easily despite allegations that he gropes women, which he assures the voters that he will never do in his
capacity as governor "without a really good reason." In his victory statement, Schwarzenegger announces that he will appoint a stunt governor, who will handle the tasks that he is physically unable to perform, such as pronouncing words.

In other California news, fires rage out of control in large sectors of the state, destroying hundreds of homes and an estimated 27,000 Starbucks.

In Washington, Congress approves President Bush's request for $87 billion to Iraqify Iraq, so that it will be more Iraq-like. The money will also be used for the War on Terror, including $23.99 to pay for what is described as "a complete overhaul" of the U.S. intelligence community's Magic 8-Ball. On the economic front, there is good news from the Commerce Department, which reports a sharp upturn in the nation's economy, credited primarily to spending by North Korean troops.

In the Democratic presidential race, Sen. Bob "Bob" Graham drops out, narrowing the field to 2,038 people, if you count Dennis Kucinich.

In a surprising development, conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh shocks his millions of listeners when, confirming tabloid reports, he reveals on his popular syndicated show that he is, biologically, a woman. He promises to get treatment.

In immigration news, federal agents in 21 states descend on Wal-Mart stores that are allegedly employing illegal immigrants; the agents emerge hours later, glassy-eyed, holding bags filled with hundreds of dollars' worth of bargains but unable to remember what they went in there for in the first place.

China, culminating a two-decade effort to develop a manned spaceflight program, puts its first astronaut in orbit. Work begins immediately on a program to develop a way to get him back down.

In health news, authorities in Boston, Chicago and New York report a rash of suicide attempts after the Florida Marlins, a franchise with essentially the same amount of tradition as Britney Spears, win their second World Series in six years. The Marlins are helped by a fluke play in the National League playoffs when a foul ball, about to be caught by Cubs outfielder Moises Alou, is deflected by a man who is later identified as a Fiesta Bowl official.

And speaking of foul, in . . .

**NOVEMBER**

...a big political stink erupts over adding drug benefits to Medicare, with Republicans and Democrats battling fiercely to see who can pander the hardest to the crucial senior citizen voting bloc without letting the other voting blocs figure out how much they will have to pay. The Republicans prevail with the help of AARP; this angers some AARP members, who attempt to burn their membership cards in protest, but are unable to work those newfangled childproof cigarette lighters.

In other political news, Democratic front-runner Howard Dean creates a stir when he says he wants to be the candidate of "guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks." After harsh criticism from his 2,037 opponents, Dean clarifies his position, explaining that he meant "guys using their pickup trucks to take Confederate flags to the dump to burn them because Confederate flags are bad."

In a move that outrages traditionalists, Massachusetts legalizes gay marriage. California, not to be outdone, outlaws marriage between heterosexuals.

In a dramatic Thanksgiving Day surprise, President Bush makes a top-secret trip to Iraq, where he serves turkey to the troops and delivers a moving speech thanking them for their efforts. The visit puts the troops in high spirits until about three minutes after the president leaves, at which point the turkey, which turns out to be a suicide turkey, explodes.

In entertainment news, CBS cancels its airing of the made-for-TV miniseries "The Reagans" after conservatives object to the portrayal of Ronald Reagan, who is played in the movie by a heavily made-up Bette Midler. Similar charges are leveled against NBC for its movie about Jessica Lynch, who is forced to issue a statement stressing that, despite what the movie suggests, she had "nothing to do with raising the flag at Iwo Jima."

In other entertainment news, pop superstar Michael Jackson again finds himself in legal trouble when authorities in Santa Barbara order him...
fingerprinted and booked on charges of "extreme creepiness, even for California." Jackson's attorney expresses outrage, telling a press conference that his client "doesn't even have fingerprints."

And the strangeness only gets stranger in . . .

DECEMBER

. . . which begins on an upbeat note thanks to strong holiday retail sales, as measured by the economic indicator of Mall Shoppers Injured in Fights Over Sony PlayStations. In other positive news, the Commerce Department reports that the economic recovery has finally resulted in job creation. "So far, it's only the one job, and it's in urinal maintenance," notes the department. "But if things work out, it could become full time."

On the War on Terror front, the nation gets a chilling reminder of its continued vulnerability when more than 200 federal airport security workers are hospitalized because of continued exposure to what medical investigators describe as "really funky passenger feet."

In a move that concerns legal scholars, the Supreme Court announces that it is switching to a new "reality" TV format, called "Who Wants to Be a Justice?" in which ordinary citizens will help the court decide cases. In its first decision, the court, by an 11-9 vote, raises the national speed limit to 140 mph.

In other entertainment news, Madonna kisses Cher, Emeril, Paris Hilton, Barney, Flipper and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

In a medical breakthrough, a Houston-based team of surgeons, working for 17 hours in a risky, first-of-its kind operation, is able to separate a 21-year-old woman from her cellular telephone. She expires within hours, but doctors report that the phone is stable, and they expect its condition to improve dramatically "once it finds a new host."

The month's biggest surprise occurs when U.S. troops finally capture a filthy and bedraggled Saddam Hussein hiding in a hole along with 11 other members of the cast of the CBS reality show "Survivor: Iraq." The former dictator immediately hires attorney Johnnie Cochran, who reveals that his defense strategy will be based on the legal argument that "if there's no WMD, you must set him free."

Finally, in a heartwarming story of the season, on Christmas Eve, U.S. military radar detects a mysterious object streaking across the sky. A telescopic investigation reveals that the object is what NASA describes as "a heavily modified" 1953 Ford pickup truck, driven by Cuban refugees, apparently bound for the moon.

Here's hoping they make it. Here's also hoping that 2004 is a wonderful year, or at least better than 2003.

Which shouldn't be hard.

Dave Barry will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m. on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

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