

CAN ANYBODY HERE PLAY THIS GAME?

By Michael Ventura
September 18, 1998

Now and again in history there comes a mark in time, a point of no return, a day when the horrors that will determine our future assemble all at once in a gruesomely grinning chorus line and everything becomes too obvious to ignore but too overwhelming to control. Historians may look at *The New York Times* of September 1, 1998, and decide that it marks such a day.

The headline: "DOW OFF 6% IN WAVE OF SELLING, ERASING MARKET'S GAINS FOR '98 -- 516-Point Decline." That speaks for itself. The bubble has burst. On the same page, news from Russia: Yeltsin's choice for Prime Minister was rejected, "leaving the country virtually rudderless." Directly beneath: a report about Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright by one of the *Times*' ace political journalists, Steven Erlanger. It included this remarkable passage: "Ms. Albright and the State Department have not been crucial players [in foreign policy], White House officials say. With Mr. Clinton so distracted, it is not immediately clear who is in charge." A prominent journalist for the world's paper-of-record does not like to admit he doesn't know who's in charge of American foreign policy. He does so only to make one crucial point: At present there is no one in charge of American foreign policy.

As a country we, like our president, are obsessed with ourselves. We've barely noticed a foreign policy in which either our moves are sporadic (Clinton's anti-terrorist bombings), or else we make pronouncements (the "deadline" to Israel some months ago) then forget them, losing the credibility of our word as a nation. "Rudderless" fits us as well as Russia. And this is a terribly dangerous moment for America to be rudderless.

On page 3, reports were of the financial crumbling of Latin America. And on the same page, what might have rated a headline last year is merely a four-paragraph item: evidence that the Colombian drug cartel contributed money to Mexican presidential elections. So not only is everyone south of us threatened with economic collapse, but the country on our border (like Russia, and like many countries in Africa and Southern Asia) has little functioning law not only in the street but at the highest levels of power.

Page 6: "Missile Test by North Korea: Dark Omen for Washington." North Korea tested a missile by firing it through Japan's air space -- a shot across the bow. The only military purpose of such a missile is to deliver weapons of mass destruction. North Korea, close to developing its own bomb, sells advanced weaponry to Third World countries. For the already endangered people of the Third World, life has just become much more precarious.

A tiny three-paragraph item at the bottom of that page: "Riot Erupts in Indonesia." Not just any riot. "The biggest riot since unrest in May helped oust Suharto." Remember that Indonesia is the fourth-largest country in the world, and the largest Moslem country. It, too, is in chaos. Ripe for military rule, fascism, or fundamentalism -- developments that would threaten every country in the region.

Page 8: "Leader's Loss in Panama Clouds Future of the Canal." A Constitutional amendment that would have allowed the U.S. puppet president to stay in office five more years was handily defeated by Panamanian voters. Next May there will be an election which our puppet is likely to lose. "The election is important because the new

Government will take possession of the canal." If an unfriendly government controls the Canal, the repercussions for the U.S. could be severe. More than half of America's GNP is generated on the West Coast, and with much of the West Coast's imports and exports dependent on Canal access ... well, we're looking at trouble.

Page 9: "Latest Wave of Flooding Adds to Asia's Misery." For all the hype of recent years, China is still an underdeveloped country with few roads and rail lines. That is why their floods have been devastating. It's hard to maneuver in China. Vast stretches of farmland have been intentionally flooded in order to relieve pressure on rushing rivers so that they don't crest upon China's major industrial cities. Millions are homeless and hungry, many in areas that get very cold in winter. There is no hope of evacuation, no hope of building temporary housing (there isn't sufficient transportation to get building material there in time). What this does to economic prospects in the region, and the economic hopes that the United States was pinning upon China, no one in authority has had the courage to speak of. If the Chinese now devalue their currency -- as they are speaking of doing -- the Asian debacle will get even worse.

Page 11: Remember this issue is dated September 1. The next day, President Clinton would land in Moscow for talks that even White House sources agreed would be useless. The page-11 story said that "of four newspapers published in Moscow, including two serious journals ... not one mentioned the next day's [Clinton-Yeltsin] meeting -- not merely on page 1, but anywhere." So much for the prestige and clout of our president.

Turn to the funny pages ... I mean, the Op-Ed pages. There is the obligatory nice-nice piece by one Morgan S. Roach (no novelist would dare make up such a byline, except of course Charles Dickens). Mr. Roach is "chief economist" of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, one of the biggest Wall Street outfits. "Worldwide deflation can't happen without a collapse in worldwide demand ... Such a collapse is highly unlikely today." These are the same experts who told us that the Asian crisis would not impact the United States, and who assured us that the International Monetary Fund's actions in Indonesia and Russia would be effective. These people are not to be taken seriously.

Look at the next day's issue of *The New York Times*, September 2nd. The American non-president is embracing the Russian non-president "for a summit meeting whose purpose was far from clear, given Russia's turmoil and its lack of a functioning government." A country without a government can't pay its governmental debts -- especially when it has no money. Sooner or later this must be officially admitted by someone. The consequences are enormous for the world financial system. Germany holds a lot of paper on Russia. If Russia defaults, German banks are in bad trouble. Germany is the linchpin of the European economy. The Russian collapse could bring the continent's economies to their knees.

Farther down on Page 1, under the headline "Global Search for an Economic Parachute," one Allen Sinai, a "chief global economist for Primark Decision Economics, an economic strategy advisory group," said: "At the moment there is a vacuum of policy. No one has any good ideas. At the moment one cannot see any real turnaround in Asia, Japan is getting sicker, and Russia was a throwaway of money." Ah, Japan ... second only to the U.S. in economic power. But many of its major banks are solvent only on paper. That charade can last just so long. Even American government officials admit (off the record), that a Japanese meltdown could trigger a world Depression. Many fear Japan's meltdown is near.

Page 2: the chaos in Africa. Too terrible, too frightening, too gruesome in its scale of human suffering, to profane with commentary. (And no commentary can

encompass the danger of India and Pakistan at each other's throats with nuclear capability. Not to mention what anarchy in nuclear-armed Russia could mean for all of us.)

Page 4: United States officials wanted to confer with North Korea's American delegation about those provocative missile tests. "The North Koreans failed to show up for today's meeting." Can you imagine another country *failing to show up for a crucial scheduled meeting* when a real President was in office? I am no fan of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, or Ronald Reagan, but no countries stood us up on their watch.

Meanwhile on page 10, Clinton is telling Russia, "You have to play by the rules." That phrase, in his mouth, is ludicrous -- and was received for what it was worth, precisely nothing. On Page 11 a commentary headline reads, "Summit Meeting Teeters on Edge of Self-Parody." And the whole world knows it.

Our president is concerned only with saving his own skin. His so-called foreign policy has been dominated by whatever the free-market corporate honchos thought would profit them -- strategies that are now proving worthless. Our Congress has scant foreign policy expertise, and cares less. We are rudderless, with no credible world-class leader on any level of our government, neither in office nor in the wings. The Republicans are dominated by the Christian right. The Democrats have no credibility. Our elections are rigged by corporate "soft money." We have rule of law on the local and state level, but chaos on the federal level. Our much-hyped technology can't help us with this. We've opted for one "lesser evil" after another, until now we have no true electoral options. The world is in free-fall, and we are falling with it. The dangers of Depression and wars are imminent, and it seems no country or leader has the stability and power to put the brakes on.

On September 1 the papers reported that Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa were tied with 55 home runs and set to break all records. By the time this piece is published, those records will be broken. "Chasin' History," the sports guys call it. Wrong. History is chasing us.

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