

VOICES OF AMERICA

THE VIEW FROM

LOCATION: Bloomington, IL

DATES: 11-13 Sept. 2001

SUBJECT: Obvious

CAVEAT: Written very fast and in what probably qualifies as shock

SYNECDOCHE

IN TRUE MIDWEST FASHION, Bloomingtonians aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won't be any of that strangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now there's something to talk about that outweighs all reserve, like we were somehow all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident. E.g., overheard in the checkout line at Burwell's (which is sort of the Neiman Marcus of gas station/convenience store plazas — centrally located athwart both one-way main drags, and with the best tobacco prices in town, it's a municipal treasure) between a lady in an Osco cashier's smock and a man in a dungaree jacket cut off at the shoulders to make a sort of homemade vest: "With my boys they thought it was all some movie like that *Independence Day* til then after a while they started to notice it was the same movie on all the channels." (The lady didn't say how old her boys were.)

WEDNESDAY

EVERYBODY HAS flags out. Homes, businesses. It's odd: You never see anybody putting out a flag, but by Wednesday morning there they all are. Big flags, small flags, regular flag-size flags. A lot of homeowners here have those special angled flag-holders by their front door, the kind whose brace takes four Phillips screws. And thousands of those little hand-held flags-on-a-stick you normally see at parades — some yards have dozens all over as if they'd somehow sprouted overnight. Rural-road people attach the little flags to their mailboxes out by the street. Some cars have them wedged in their grille or duct-taped to the antenna. Some upscale people have actual poles; their flags are at half-mast. More than a few large homes around Franklin Park or out on the east side even have enormous multistory flags hanging gonfalon-style down over their facades. It's a total mystery where people get flags this big or how they got them up there.

My own next-door neighbor, a retired CPA and vet whose home- and lawn-care are nothing short of phenomenal, has a regulation-size anodized flagpole secured in 18" of reinforced cement that none of the other neighbors like very much because they think it draws lightning. He says there's a very particular etiquette to having your flag at half-mast: You're supposed to first run it all the way up to the top and then bring it halfway down. Otherwise it's an insult or something. His flag is out straight and popping smartly in the wind. It's far and away the biggest flag on our street. You can also hear the wind in the cornfields just south; it sounds the way light surf sounds when you're two dunes back from it. Mr. N—'s flag's halyard has metal elements that clank loudly against the pole when it's windy, which is something else the other neighbors don't care for. His driveway and mine are almost side by side, and he's out here on a stepladder polishing his pole with some kind of ointment and a chamois cloth — I shit you not — and in fairness it's true that his metal pole does shine like God's own wrath.

"Hell of a nice flag and display apparatus, Mr. N—."

"Ought to be. Cost enough."

MRS. THOMPSON'S

Journalist and novelist DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, 39, grew up in Urbana, Illinois, and lives in Bloomington. His report on John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign for "Rolling Stone" won a National Magazine Award in Feature Writing. His latest book is "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men."

"Seen all the other flags out everywhere this morning?"

This gets him to look down and smile, if a bit grimly. "Something isn't it?" Mr. N— is not what you'd call the friendliest next-door neighbor. I really only know him because his church and mine are in the same softball league, for which he serves with immense precision as his team's statistician. We are not close. He's nevertheless the first one I ask:

"Say Mr. N—, suppose somebody like a foreign person or TV reporter were to come by and ask you to say what the purpose of all these flags everywhere after the Horror and everything yesterday was, exactly — what do you think you'd say?"

"Why" (after a brief interval of giving me the same sort of look he usually gives my lawn) "to show our support and empathy in terms of what's going on, as Americans."*

The point being that on Wednesday here there's a weird accretive pressure to have a flag out. If the purpose of a flag is to make a statement, it seems like at a certain point of density of flags you're making more of a statement if you don't have one out. It's not totally clear what statement this would be. What if you just don't happen to have a flag? Where has everyone gotten these flags, especially the little ones you can put on your mailbox? Are they all from July 4th and people just save them, like Christ-

* Plus selected other responses from various times during the day's flag- and Magic-Marker-hunts when circumstances allowed the question to be asked without one seeming like a smart-ass or loon:

"To show we're Americans and not going to bow down to anybody."

"The flag is a pseudo-archetype, a reflexive semion designed to pre-empt and negate the critical function" (grad student).

"For pride."

"What they do is symbolize unity and that we're all together behind the victims in this war. That they've fucked with the wrong people this time."

mas ornaments? How do they know to do this? Even a sort of half-collapsed house down the street that everybody thought was unoccupied has a flag in the ground by the driveway.

The Yellow Pages have nothing under Flag. There's actual interior tension: Nobody walks by or stops their car and says, "Hey, your house doesn't have a flag," but it gets easier and easier to imagine people thinking it. None of the grocery stores in town turn out to stock any flags. The novelty shop downtown has nothing but Halloween stuff. Only a few businesses are open, but even the closed ones are displaying some sort of flag. It's almost surreal. The VFW hall is a good bet, but it can't open til noon if at all (it has a bar). The lady at Burwell's references a certain hideous Qik-n-EZ store out by I-74 at which she was under the impression she'd seen some little plastic flags back in the racks with all the bandannas and Nascar caps, but by the time I get there they turn out to be gone, snapped up by parties unknown. The reality is that there is not a flag to be had in this town. Stealing one out of somebody's yard is clearly out of the question. I'm standing in a Qik-n-EZ afraid to go home. All those people dead, and I'm sent to the edge by a plastic flag. It doesn't get really bad until people ask if I'm OK and I have to lie and say it's a Benadryl reaction (which in fact can happen). . . . Until in one more of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance it's the Qik-n-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani, by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder and a strange kind of unspoken understanding, and who lets me go back and sit in the stock room amid every conceivable petty vice and indulgence America has to offer and compose myself, and who only slightly later, over styrofoam cups of a strange kind of tea with a great deal of milk in it, suggests, gently, construction paper and "Magical Markers," which explains my now-beloved homemade flag.

AERIAL & GROUND VIEWS

BLOOMINGTON IS A CITY of 65,000 in the central part of a state that is extremely flat, so that you can see the town's salients from very far away. Three major interstates converge here, and several rail lines. The town's almost exactly halfway between Chicago and St. Louis, and its origins involve being a big train depot. It has a smaller twin city, Normal, that's built around a university and a slightly different story. Both towns together are like 110,000.

As Midwest cities go, the only remarkable thing about Bloomington is its prosperity. It's recession-proof. Some of this is due to the county's land, which is world-class fertile and so expensive you can't even find out how much it costs. But Bloomington is also the national HQ for State Farm, which is the great dark god of consumer insurance and for all practical purposes owns the town, and because of which Bloomington's east side is all smoked-glass complexes and Build-To-Suit developments and a six-lane beltway of malls and franchises that's killing the old downtown, plus a large and ever-wider split between the town's two basic classes and cultures, so well and truly symbolized by the SUV and pickup truck," respectively.

Winter here is a pitiless bitch, but in the warm months Bloomington's a little like a seaside community except the ocean here is corn, which grows steroidically and stretches to the earth's curve in all directions. The town itself in summer is intensely green — streets bathed in tree-shade and homes' explosive gardens

* Despite some people's impression, the native accent isn't Southern but simply rural, whereas corporate transplants have no accent at all (in Mrs. Bracero's phrase, State Farm people "sound like the folks on TV").

and area-code-size parks and golf courses you almost need eye-protection to look at, and row upon row of broad weedless fertilized lawns all lined up flush to the sidewalk with special edging tools. (People here are deeply into lawn-care; my neighbors tend to mow about as often as they shave.) To be honest, it can be a little creepy, especially in high summer when nobody's out and all that green just sits in the heat and seethes.

Like many Midwest towns, B-N is lousy with churches: four full pages in the phone book. Everything from Unitarian to bug-eyed Pentecostal. There's even a church for agnostics. Except for church — plus I suppose your basic parades, fireworks and a couple corn festivals — there isn't much public community. Everybody pretty much has his family and neighbors and tight little circle of friends. By New York standards folks keep to themselves.* They play golf and grill out and go to mainstream movies . . .

. . . And they watch massive, staggering amounts of TV. I'm not just talking about the kids. Something that's obvious but still crucial to keep in mind re: Bloomington and the Horror is that reality — any really felt sense of a larger world — is televisual. New York's skyline, for instance, is as recognizable here as anyplace else, but what it's recognizable from is TV. TV's also more social here than on the East Coast, where in my experience people are almost constantly leaving home to go meet other people face-to-face in public places. There don't tend to be parties or mixers per se here; what you do in Bloomington is all get together at somebody's house and watch something.

Here, therefore, to have a home without a TV is to become a kind of constant and Kramer-like presence in others' homes, a perpetual guest of folks who can't understand why you would choose not to have a TV but are completely respectful of your need to watch TV and offer you access to their TV in the same instinctive way they'd bend to lend a hand if you tripped in the street. This is especially true of some kind of must-see, Crisis-type situation like the 2000 election snafu or this week's Horror. All you have to do is call somebody you know and say you don't have a TV: "Well shoot, boy, get over here."

TUESDAY

THERE ARE MAYBE ten days a year when it's gorgeous here, and this is one of them. It's clear and temperate and wonderfully dry after several straight weeks of what felt like living in somebody's armpit. It's just before serious harvesting starts, when the pollen's at its worst; a good percentage of the city is stoned on Benadryl, which as you probably know tends to give the early morning a kind of dreamy, underwater quality. Timewise, we're an hour behind the East Coast. By 8:00 everybody with a job is at it, and just about everybody else is home drink-

ing coffee and blowing their nose and watching *Today* or one of the other A.M. shows that broadcast (it goes without saying) from New York. At 8:00 I personally was in the shower trying to listen to a Bears postmortem on WSCR sports radio in Chicago.

The church I belong to is on the south side of Bloomington, near where I live. Most of the people I know well enough to ask if I can come over and watch their TV are members of my church. It's not one of those Protestant churches where people throw Jesus's name around or talk about the End Times, which is to say that it's not loony or vulgar, but it's fairly serious, and people in the congregation get to know each other well and to be pretty tight. Most of the congregants are working-class or retirees; there are some small-business owners. A fair number are veterans or have kids in the military or — especially — the various Reserves, because for many of these families that's simply what you do to pay for college.

The house I end up sitting with clots of dried shampoo in my hair watching most of the actual unfolding Horror at belongs to Mrs. Thompson, who is one of the world's cooler 74-year-olds and exactly the kind of person who in an emergency even if her phone is busy you know you can just come on over. Her house is about a mile away, on the other side of a mobile home park. The streets are not crowded but they're not yet as empty as they're going to get. Mrs. Thompson's is a tiny immaculate one-story home that on the West Coast would be called a bungalow and on the south side of Bloomington is simply called a house. Mrs. Thompson is a longtime church member and a leader in the congregation, and her living room tends to be kind of a gathering place. She's also the mom of one of my best friends here, F—, who was a Ranger in Vietnam and got shot in the knee and now works kind of unhappily for a contractor installing Victoria's Secret franchises in malls. He's in the middle of a divorce (long story) and living with Mrs. T. while the court decides on the disposition of his house. F— is one of those for-real combat veterans who doesn't talk about the war or even belong to the VFW but is sometimes somber in a haunted way, and always goes quietly off to camp by himself over Memorial Day weekend, and you can tell that he carries some very heavy shit in his head. Like most construction guys he has to get to his job site early and was long gone by the time I got to his mom's, which was just after the second plane hit the South Tower, meaning probably around 8:10. In retrospect, the first sign of shock was the fact that I didn't ring the bell but just came on in, which normally here one would never do. Thanks to her son's trade connections, Mrs. T. has a 42" flat-panel Philips TV on which Dan Rather appears for a second in shirtsleeves with his hair slightly mussed. (People in Bloomington seem overwhelmingly to prefer CBS News; it's unclear why.) Several other ladies from church are already over here, but I don't know if I ex- [Cont. on 132]

† EDITOR'S NOTE: SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED, AND SOME DETAILS HAVE BEEN ALTERED.

* The native term for a conversation is visit.

WALLACE

[Cont. from 95] changed greetings with anyone because I remember when I came in everybody was staring in transfixed horror at one of the very few pieces of video CBS never reran, which was a distant wide-angle shot of the North Tower and its top floors' exposed steel lattice in flames and of dots detaching from the building and moving through smoke down the screen, which then that jerky tightening of the shot revealed to be actual people in coats and ties and skirts with their shoes falling off as they fell, some hanging onto ledges or girders and then letting go, upside-down or writhing as they fell and one couple almost seeming (unverifiable) to be hugging each other as they fell all those stories and shrank back to dots as the camera then all of a sudden pulled back to the long view — I have no idea how long the clip took — after which Rather's mouth seemed to move for a second before any sound emerged, and everyone in the room sat back and looked at one another with expressions that seemed somehow both childlike and horribly old. I think one or two people made some sort of sound. It's not clear what else to say. It seems grotesque to talk about being traumatized by a video when the people in the video were dying. Something about the shoes also falling made it worse. I think the older ladies took it better than I did. Then the hideous beauty of the rerun clip of the second plane hitting the tower, the blue and silver and black and spectacular orange of it, as more little moving dots fell. Mrs. Thompson was in her chair, which is a rocker with floral cushions. The living room has two other chairs, and a huge corduroy sofa that F— and I had had to take the front door off its hinges to get in the house. All the seats were occupied, meaning five or six other people, most women, all over fifty, and there were more voices in the kitchen, one of which was very upset-sounding and belonged to the psychologically delicate Mrs. R—, who I don't know very well but is said to have once been a beauty of great local repute. Many of the people are Mrs. T.'s neighbors, some still in robes, and at various times people leave to go home and use the phone and come back, or leave altogether (one younger lady went to go get her children out of school), and other people come. At one point, around the time the South Tower was falling so perfectly-seeming down into itself — I remember thinking it was falling sort

of the way an elegant lady faints, but it was Mrs. Bracero's normally pretty much useless and irritating son, Duane, who pointed out that what it really looked like is if you took some film of a NASA liftoff and ran it backward, which now after several re-viewings does seem dead-on — there were at least ten people in the house. The living room was dim because in the summer everyone keeps their drapes pulled.*

Is it normal not to remember things very well after only a couple days, or at any rate the order of things? I know at some point for a while there was the sound of somebody mowing his lawn, which seemed totally bizarre, but I don't remember if anyone said anything. Sometimes it seems like nobody speaks and sometimes like everybody's talking at once. There's also a lot of telephonic activity. None of these women carry cell phones (Duane has a pager whose point is unclear), so it's just Mrs. T.'s old wall-mount in the kitchen. Not all the calls make rational sense. One side effect of the Horror seems to be an overwhelming desire to call everybody you love. It was established early on that you couldn't reach New York; 212 yields only a-weird whooping sound. People keep asking Mrs. T.'s permission until she tells them to knock it off and for heaven's sake just use the phone. Some of the ladies reach their husbands, who are apparently all gathered around TVs and radios at their workplaces; for a while bosses are too shocked to think to send people home. Mrs. T. has coffee on, but another sign of Crisis is that if you want some you have to get it yourself — usually it just sort of appears. From the door to the kitchen I remember seeing the second tower fall and being confused about whether it was a replay of the first tower falling. Another thing about the hay fever is that you can't ever be totally sure someone's crying, but over the two hours of first-run Horror, with bonus reports of the crash in PA and Bush getting rushed to a secret SAC bunker and a car-bomb that's gone off in Chicago (the latter

then retracted), pretty much everybody either cries or not, according to his or her relative abilities. Mrs. Thompson says less than almost anybody. I don't think she cries, but she doesn't rock her chair as usual, either. Her first husband's death was apparently sudden and grisly, and I know at times during the war F— would be in the field and she wouldn't hear from him for weeks at a time and had no idea whether he was even alive. Duane Bracero's main contribution is to keep iterating how much like a movie it is. Duane, who's at least 25 but still lives at home while supposedly studying to be an arc welder, is one of these people who always wear camouflage T-shirts and paratrooper boots but would never dream of actually enlisting (as, to be fair, neither would I). He has also kept his hat on in Mrs. Thompson's house. It always seems to be important to have at least one person to hate.

It turns out the cause of poor old tendony Mrs. R—'s meltdown in the kitchen is that she has a grandniece or something who's doing some kind of internship at Time, Inc. in the Time Life Bldg or whatever it's called, about which Mrs. R— and whoever she's managed to call know only that it's a vertiginously tall skyscraper someplace in New York, and she's out of her mind with worry, and two other ladies have been out here the whole time holding both her hands and trying to decide whether they should call a doctor (Mrs. R— has kind of a history), and I end up doing pretty much the only good I do all day by explaining to Mrs. R— where midtown is. It thereupon emerges that none of the people here I'm watching the Horror with — not even the few ladies who'd gone to see *Cats* as part of some group tour thing through the church in 1991 — have even the vaguest notion of Manhattan's layout and don't know, for example, how far south the financial district and Statue of Liberty are; they have to be shown via pointing out the water in the foreground of the skyline they all know so well (from TV).

This is the beginning of the vague but progressive feeling of alienation from these good people that builds throughout the part of the Horror where people flee rubble and dust. These ladies are not stupid, or ignorant. Mrs. Thompson can read both Latin and Spanish, and Ms. Voightlander is a certified speech therapist who once explained to me that the strange gulping sound that makes Tom Brokaw so distracting to listen to is an actual speech impediment

* Mrs. T.'s living room is prototypical working-class Bloomington too, by the way: double-pane windows, white Sears curtains w/ valance, catalogue clock with a background of mallards, magazine rack with CSM and Reader's Digest, inset bookshelves used for Franklin collectibles and framed photos of relatives and their families, two small tasteful knit samplers w/ the "Desiderata" and Prayer of St. Francis, antimacassars on every good chair and neutral, wall-to-wall carpeting so thick that you can't see your feet (people take their shoes off at the door; it's basic common courtesy).

called a "glottahl". It was of the ladies out in the kitchen with Mrs. R— who'd pointed out that that week was the anniversary of the Camp David Accords, which was news to me. What the Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a bizarre absence of cynicism in the room. It doesn't once occur to anyone here to remark on how it's maybe a little odd that all three network anchors are in shirtsleeves, or to consider that it's possible that Rather's hair being mussed is not 100% accidental, or that the relentless rerunning of spectacular footage might not be just in case some viewers were only now tuning in and hadn't seen it yet. No one else seems to notice Bush's weird little lightless eyes seem to get closer and closer together throughout his taped statement not that some of his lines sound almost plagiaristically identical to statements made by Bruce Willis (as a right-wing wacko, recall) in *The Siege* a couple years back. Nor that at least some of the shock of the last two hours has been how closely various shots and scenes have mirrored the plots of everything from *Die Hard I-III* and *Air Force One* to Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor*. Nobody's edgy or sophisticated enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before. Instead what they do is all sit together and feel really bad, and pray. Nobody does anything as nauseous as try to make everybody all pray together or pray aloud or anything, but you can tell what they're doing.

Make no mistake: This is mostly a good thing. It makes you think and do things you probably wouldn't if watching alone, like for one thing to pray, silently and fervently, that you're wrong about Bush, that your view of him is distorted and he's actually far smarter and more substantial than you believe, not just some weird soulless golem or nexus of interests dressed up in a suit, but a statesman of courage and probity and . . . and it's good, this is good to pray this way. It's just a little lonely to have to. Innocent people can be hard to be around. I'm not for a moment claiming that everyone in Bloomington is like this (Mrs. T.'s son F— isn't, though he's an outstanding person). I'm trying to explain the way part of the horror of the Horror was knowing that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my own — mine, and F—'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's — than these ladies'. ★

BIN LADEN

[Cont. from 102]

Sadly, no one I talked to thinks that will happen in his lifetime unless the U.N. steps in and a new country is born.

Recently, Turabi lost power. The puppet president he had handled for so long turned against the master and he now lives under house arrest. Turabi was educated in the West. He said he loved Shakespeare, and I never doubted him. He was a debater, easy to engage and always willing to enter a dialogue. But his followers lived in a world of stark whites and blacks and were quickly tiresome talkers-when, that is, they deigned to even acknowledge my presence.

Turabi was the top man in a hierarchy of one. Directly under him were Hundreds of dedicated fighters, a select few, like bin Laden, rich enough to finance their own groups within the umbrella organization. More problems I think emanate from the fanaticism that these men wear like badges of honor. They don't think beyond the mission at hand: destruction of Western culture. They've ratcheted up terrorism beyond anything we've ever experienced. Over the course of thirty years, the troubles in Northern Ireland, as traumatic as they have been, have caused approximately 3,600 deaths. In one morning, Islamic fundamentalists nearly doubled that number.

Moreover, the new order and leadership of the revolution took special pleasure whenever they used America against itself. They're humorless people. Their idea of a joke is using training camps built by Americans. They laugh thinking about their training by former Green Berets.

It's important, I believe, that America not embark on yet another program that could boomerang. I reckon the fundamentalist leadership would derive warped enjoyment if it could tear a page from the Bible and rub it in our faces. In particular, I'm thinking of the Gospel of St. Matthew describing a savior killed for the sins of others. Bin Laden may be insulated from the doings of his top aides. He's in lousy health, his operation is huge. Some underlings enjoy large budgets and free reign — like Al Zawahiri, a senior member of Al Qaeda, or the Lebanese operative Imad Mugniyeh, who has connections with Iraq and the Hezbollah. If we catch bin Laden, the U.S. case against him must be airtight, good enough to convict him and send him off to oblivion. After all, history will judge us, too. And it would be a grave mistake to 'unch bin Laden's star so as to lead others on a journey like his. ★

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