

## Contemporary Affairs

**FASTER:**

*The Acceleration of Just About Everything.*

By James Gleick. Pantheon. 324 pp.  
\$24

Living in the fast lane obsesses us. We speed-dial and leave a message on a quick-playback answering machine. Hastening through our crowded appointment schedule, we punch door-close buttons in elevators that accelerate to near eardrum-blowing thresholds. In the last decade alone, we have eliminated fadeaways between TV commercials, diminished the duration of news sound bites by half, and developed instant opinion surveys.

In this infectious, tongue-in-cheek romp, science writer Gleick—author of *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1987) and *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* (1992)—examines modernity's attempts to freeze and squeeze time. He looks at how we poll, trade stocks, package food, and edit TV programs, all with the goal of compacting more information into a shorter duration. The author argues that our quest to live in "real time," where the world both near and far reacts instantaneously to our every action, began with the computer. Gleick is a master at explaining how computers speed everything from air and road traffic to directory assistance.

But he argues that all our time-saving measures don't really add up. The microwave lops only four minutes off food preparation time, and about one-quarter of our phone time is spent on hold. When new time savers render old ones obsolete, we are obliged to learn new skills, which of course itself takes time. Overall, our lives may be less efficient and fast paced than we like to think: according to time usage surveys, the average American spends three hours a day watching TV, an hour eating, an hour on the phone, four minutes having sex (roughly equivalent to the time spent filling out forms), and six hours working. That last figure, despite our workaholic frenzy, is not increasing.

Why does time so consume us? For one

thing, we confront too many options, and selecting among them takes time. We also structure our lives so that we can have more leisure—but leisure too can become overstructured, only adding to our feeling of being pressed. In addition, perhaps we seek the sense of accomplishment that comes with deeming ourselves organized and in control, however delusional the belief may be.

In the dwindling nonindustrialized cultures of the world, work and leisure conflate. People don't fill time; it fills them. By contrast, those of us in industrialized countries were trained, long before we became technophiles, to treat time as a commodity, an entity that exists outside ourselves—just look at that gadget on your wrist. All commodities can be spent, wasted, or rationed, and our stock of time, like many other commodities, often seems inadequate to our needs.

—Anthony Aveni

**AN AFFAIR OF STATE:**

*The Investigation, Impeachment, and Trial of President Clinton.*

By Richard A. Posner. Harvard Univ. Press. 276 pp. \$24.95

Someday a great legal thinker will write a wonderful book on the investigation and impeachment of President Bill Clinton. Posner, the prolific and generally brilliant chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, seems in many ways the ideal author. He is rigorous factually and legally, and he has a concern for the interaction of morality and law that is critical to any meaningful examination of the subject.

Unfortunately, Posner's book comes too early to transcend the discussions that took place as events were unfolding, and too late to add to those discussions. It was written as the scandal was playing out, and much of it feels like an elegant rehash of arguments debated in real time on MSNBC: what constitutes an impeachable offense, the viability of lame-duck impeachments, the constitutionality of censure. Posner generally defends Ken-

neth Starr, and he spends considerable time emphasizing the seriousness of Clinton's offenses and the strength of the evidence against him. He evinces amused contempt toward the congressional proceedings, and less-amused contempt toward the president's defenders.

The author does present several useful and often witty insights. A provocative section examines the battle over Clinton as a species of war. In addition, Posner's portrayal of the Kulturkampf dimensions of the saga is keenly compelling. And he is at his best when attacking the public intellectuals and legal experts who served as ever-present and almost-ever-banal commentators. Posner criticizes them for both "reticence and stridency": they generally failed to take on the scandal's fundamental ethical questions, in his view, and the commentary we did get was shabby, predictable, and often dishonest. He observes that "it is tempting to conclude . . . that

the left intelligentsia lacks a moral core, while the right intelligentsia has a morbidly exaggerated fear of moral laxity."

But readers looking for big-picture answers will be disappointed. Posner ultimately hedges on whether President Clinton's conduct merited impeachment. His qualified defense of the independent counsel, though persuasive as far as it goes, doesn't take on the more sophisticated criticisms, those that focus not on specific ethical allegations but on Starr's pattern of sublimating all other social and governmental interests to the immediate, though often marginal, needs of his probe. Posner's distaste for the independent counsel law (which Congress has allowed to lapse) and his disapproval of the Supreme Court's decision allowing the Paula Jones case to proceed are conventional wisdom. *An Affair of State* lacks the altitude needed for a major work on this familiar subject.

—Benjamin Wittes