

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-