Twenty minutes ago, the only topics on the nation's radar screen were Afghanistan and terrorism.

Now there's Enron.

The capture of our news networks, front pages, magazine covers, talk radio and opinion venues occurred with shocking speed, the way a virus can infect an entire population in an eye-blink. ABC's Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts devoted a Sunday morning show to the scandal. The New York Times, days after ending its separate terrorism section, "A Nation Challenged," launched a new standing headline: "Enron's Collapse." The tipping point of the Enron story came with the revelation that Arthur Andersen, Enron's accounting firm, destroyed documents. Before, the news was all-Osama-all-the-time. Now it feels as if we've time-traveled back to the comfy pre-9/11 country where colorful, powerful people did stupid bad things.

What made Enron the first story to sideline terrorism?

For starters, people love yarns, and Enron is a great melodrama, with riveting characters and stunning reversals of fortune, such as "Kenny-Boy" Lay, the president's high-flying friend brought low, and the thousands of Enron employees who've lost their jobs, their savings and their pensions.

There's Sherron Watkins, who is emerging as the Cassandra of this Texas tragedy, the prophet whom no one believed, described in the lead of one story as a Bible-study-class-goer who never refused to buy cookies from a Girl Scout who came to her door, and in another as a tough-talking, cursing woman in a man's world, a bull in a china shop -- a great role awaiting a Golden Globe nomination.

There are smoking guns, such as the shredding parties at Enron and Andersen ("smoking howitzers," one attorney called them); clandestine calls for help to cronies in the Cabinet; code names such as Raptor and Condor, as good
as anything in James Bond; conspiracy theories galore, some of them linking campaign contributions to seats at the table when Vice President Cheney's secrecy-shrouded task force wrote the nation's energy policy.

The savings and loan scandal never delivered thrills like this.

What's more, the principals have made things dramatically worse for themselves, and juicier for us, the audience. When President Bush implies he barely knows Kenneth Lay, it's as though he's in the grip of some tragic destiny, forcing him to repeat the mistakes of scandal victims past, even though surely he knows better.

"It's the coverup, not the crime, that kills you," warns the Washington chorus; but the president, like Oedipus, just can't help himself. What's next: claiming executive privilege for documents and meeting minutes?

In the Justice Department, because just about everyone in Houston and Washington has to recuse himself, there's the need to create a pickup team of prosecutors. Just as telling, there are Enron paperweights and golf shirts for sale on eBay, souvenirs for those who missed out on shopping at the Titanic's gift shop.

Now the battle is on to name and frame the story.

New York Times columnist William Safire, who worked for the president destroyed by Watergate, Richard Nixon, once bedeviled the Clinton administration by coining "-gate" names for its many troubles. Safire now calls this scandal "Andersengate," hoping that the accountants will take the fall, rather than the Republican millionaires who might come to mind if the name were "Enrongate."

The Wall Street Journal editorial page floats the notion that this is "another Whitewater" -- or rather, not nearly as bad as the first Whitewater, the mother of all corruption stories, in the newspaper's view. Democratic National Committee staffers urge candidates to run against "Enronomics," an albatross even worse than secession that they hope to hang around Republican necks.

Everyone wants Enron's powerful lens focused on his or her own pet passion. Public-policy advocates claim the true story is the need for campaign-finance reform, or better oversight of accounting firms, or stronger regulatory agencies, or an effective national energy policy.

Enron is an important story, no question. Campaign-finance reform and stringent accounting standards really are worth fighting about. But I suspect that the sexiness of the Enron story -- not its substance -- is the reason it has so decisively stolen center stage.
It's incredibly good entertainment. We know that careers and futures have been ravaged by it, and we can't help watching.

In an information age, attention is everything. The war on terrorism goes on, but until some new bad thing happens (God forbid), our attention is up for grabs, and the Enron soap opera is perfection.

Prince Harry is lucky: Now, while we're otherwise engaged, is the perfect time to turn a royal scandal into a one-day story. What's troubling is how many important, difficult and -- dare one say it? -- boring stories have no chance at all to capture our attention, not in an age when entertainment reigns supreme.

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